

**"As natural as the grass
grows."**

Chinua Achebe

"Astonishing."

Madeleine Thien

"A must-read book."

***The Guardian* (UK)**

**"An urgent story
beautifully told."**

The New York Times

Nervous Conditions

A Novel

Tsitsi Dangarembga



Praise for *Nervous Conditions*

“A great writer.... She has a wonderful sense of relationships, a wonderful sense of people, a wonderful sense of place. She exposes the oppression, of women in particular, in a manner that I think is beautiful, because you can't disagree. She is not making heavy weather of this—it is as natural as the grass grows.”

—Chinua Achebe

“Tsitsi Dangarembga opened up the idea that a black woman from Zimbabwe could write a book. There's a whole generation of Zimbabwean women who are so grateful to Tsitsi for being a forerunner.”

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“Dangarembga investigates the ironic psychological demands of global capitalism on a country whose citizens have been fractured by that system. Complex and flawed, they are more than symbols.... Dangarembga treats supreme cruelty with sublime reserve.”

—*Los Angeles Review of Books*

“Dangarembga's sentences are chromatic, rich and impressively precise with wonderful detail.”

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“Dangarembga is a magpie for evocative detail.... Dangarembga’s depiction of [Tambu], abject and vulnerable, yet struggling ever onwards, is reminiscent of Jean Rhys at her best.”

—*The Spectator* (UK)

“What distinguishes Dangarembga is her centralisation of burning issues concerning the freedom of women in Zimbabwe’s patriarchal socio-economic and political milieu.”

—*The Conversation* (UK)

“The trilogy—written over thirty years and covering the period from 1968 to 1999—deserves to be better known.”

—*London Review of Books* (UK)

Nervous Conditions



by the same author

THE BOOK OF NOT
THIS MOURNABLE BODY

TSITSI DANGAREMBGA

Nervous Conditions

A Novel

Graywolf Press

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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The condition of native is a nervous condition

— From an introduction to Fanon's, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Nervous Conditions

Introduction

‘I was not sorry when my brother died.’

What an arresting first sentence! As readers (whether or not we come, like the novel, from Zimbabwe) we respond to these words in the light of the knowledge that the speaker, like the novel’s author, is a woman. Isn’t there something especially shocking — something inhuman, unnatural — in a sister’s coldness in the face of a brother’s death? Reactions such as these are plainly anticipated, for the book continues:

Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all. I feel many things these days, much more than I was able to feel in the days when I was young and my brother died, and there are reasons for this more than the consequence of age. Therefore I shall not apologize but begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother’s death, the events that put me in a position to write this account.

This is a first person narrative, addressing someone in the second person. And since, of course, the narrator knows nothing of you and me, the novel’s actual readers, it is natural to ask: Who is it that ‘may define’ our protagonist as callous? To whom, in other words, does our protagonist decline to apologize?

Well, to answer that question I must say a little more about our protagonist and her story. She is Tambudzai — Tambu for short — and we learn swiftly that her uncle is headmaster of the Mission school in Umtali, to which he has taken her brother for his education. There her brother learns to despise the village, just as he had learned in the village to despise his sisters.

Understanding that her brother's education is a way out and up, and knowing that her uncle's wife, Maiguru, has completed an education abroad, Tambu begins to ask her father why she, too, cannot be educated. He replies, 'Can you cook books and feed them to your husband?' And Tambu goes to complain to her mother:

'Baba says I do not need to be educated,' I told her scornfully. 'He says I must learn to be a good wife. Look at Maiguru,' I continued, unaware how viciously. 'She is a better wife than you.'

My mother was too old to be disturbed by my childish nonsense. She tried to diffuse some of it by telling me many things, by explaining how my father was right because even Maiguru knew how to cook and clean and grow vegetables. 'This business of womanhood is a heavy burden,' she said. 'How could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can't just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from a very early age. The earlier the better so that it is easy later on. Easy! As if it is ever easy. And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength.'

But Tambu is not persuaded, preferring to ask for seed to grow maize to sell at the market, so that *she* can pay the fees that her father will not pay.

This struggle for learning is transformed when her brother is carried away by disease. Because she has no other brothers, education into a Western modernity is suddenly available to Tambu, the oldest girl. The situation is very clearly set up: the brother's death is the condition of the sister's emancipation. From now on we watch as Tambu, grateful to her Western-education and for her

transformation from a peasant girl to an educated ‘sophisticate’, struggles to integrate the moral order of her village upbringing with a constantly growing sense of the injustice of her position as a woman. This developing awareness is driven not only by her own experience but by the lives of the women around her: her mother, fatalistic and self-giving; her uncle’s wife, an educated woman, frustrated by her husband’s inability to respect her opinions; her mother’s sister, an adult woman who follows her own way, negotiating between Tambu’s father and her lover.

And through this process of discovery Tambu is guided by her cousin, Nyasha, whose experiences in England (where both her parents acquired their post-graduate degrees) have forever alienated her vision: Nyasha rejects the absoluteness of her father’s claims to authority and believes that her educated mother is wasting herself as the helpmate of her domineering father. Yet Nyasha’s resistance has a price: in her search for bodily perfection (conceived of in a most un-Shona way in terms of an ideal of thinness) she becomes first bulimic and then anorexic, ending up in the hands of a white psychiatrist in Salisbury.

Tambu’s mother, Mainini, has a diagnosis:

‘It’s the Englishness,’ she said. ‘It’ll kill them all if they aren’t careful ...’

The anxiety that her mother may be right worries Tambu for a few days. True, she has triumphed again, receiving one of the two places in the highly competitive (and largely white) convent school of the Sacred Heart, where she is being trained by the nuns. And she enjoys its challenges, is looking forward to returning. But she has days of bad dreams, about her dead brother, and about Nyasha and Nyasha’s brother, who have both ‘succumbed’ to Englishness. Finally, however, she ‘banishes’ the suspicion that the Englishness she is acquiring at the convent will place her, too, in a nervous condition.

There is a common critical view that the modern African novel is implicitly addressed to a Western reader. Here, according to that familiar response, is what we might call a 'safari moment': a Zimbabwe constructed for the moral and literary tourist. The story I have sketched seems too easy for us to enter into; shouldn't the life of a Shona village girl be harder for us to make sense of? And doesn't its accessibility undermine its claim to speak authentically in a Zimbabwean voice?

To approach an answer let us start with the fact that Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel lacks the telltale marks of the author addressing an Other from Elsewhere. The Shona vocabulary, including the titles assumed by various members of the family, the food, the greetings: none of this comes with an explanatory gloss. Indeed, the author goes to considerable lengths to make it plain that Tambu, far from addressing a Western Other, is not even particularly at ease with that other. 'Another thing that was different about the mission was that there were many white people there.' So begins Chapter Six. And later on the same page:

Today there are fewer white people on the mission. They are called expatriates, not missionaries, and can be seen living in unpainted brick houses. But they are deified in the same way as the missionaries were because they are white so that their coming is still an honour. I am told that whether you are called an expatriate or a missionary depends on how and by whom you were recruited. Although the distinction was told to me by a reliable source, it does not stick in my mind since I have not observed it myself in my dealings with these people.

These are not the words of a character talking to an Other; indeed, though Dangarembga's irony here presupposes a reader who knows, unlike Tambu, how to use the words 'expatriate' and 'missionary' — and thus draws attention to the possibility that it will be read by a foreign reader — this is a passage that is not exactly friendly to that reader.

As important as these signs in Tambu's language of her distance from a reader from 'outside', is the fact that the central moral issue of the book — the question of how the postcolonial Western-educated woman and her sisters, daughters, mothers and aunts, peasants or workers, wage-earners or wives, shall together find ways to create meaningful lives, escaping the burdens of their oppression as women, but also as black people, as peasants, and as workers — does not directly concern Euro-American readers, whether women or men, because this question is so richly embedded in a context those readers do not know. Dangarembga's novel assumes that these concerns, which arise from that specific situation, are shared in an immediate and concrete way between the protagonist and her silent and invisible hearer, the 'you' to whom Tambu speaks.

Nevertheless, while not specifically addressed to a Western readership, the problems of racial and gender equity the text raises are not in any way unfamiliar to us. Our narrator never suggests that her readers, whoever they may be, should judge her life by standards different from their own: despite the distancing of her first paragraph — 'Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it' — she does not presuppose that she lives in a separate moral sphere. She challenges us to hear the story that leads up to her brother's death because she believes that once we have heard it, we — whoever we are — will not find her callous or unfeeling.

Tsitsi Dangarembga writes with the confidence that the story she has to tell will make sense to readers from many places, with many preoccupations, and that she can tell it without betraying the authenticity of Tambu's voice. Tambu has not been shaped to make her accessible to any specific audience, whether inside Zimbabwe or outside. She is fully imagined: a character who reveals her concerns as she tells her story, with all the details specific to its time and place. Because that world is made real in the language of the novel, it does not matter if you know nothing at all of Zimbabwe's cultures, politics and history. Everything you need waits for you in Tambu's narration.

Each novel is a message in a bottle cast into the great ocean of literature from somewhere else (even if it was written and published

last week in your home town); and what makes the novel available to its readers is not shared values or beliefs or experiences but the human capacity to conjure new worlds in the imagination. A fully realized novel provides readers with everything they need for their imaginations to go to work. It is because the world Tsitsi Dangarembga opens up in this novel is so fully realized, so compelling, that Tambu has found so many friends in so many places around the planet.

Kwame Anthony Appiah
Princeton University
June 2004

I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all. I feel many things these days, much more than I was able to feel in the days when I was young and my brother died, and there are reasons for this more than the mere consequence of age. Therefore I shall not apologise but begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account. For though the event of my brother's passing and the events of my story cannot be separated, my story is not after all about death, but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion — Nyasha, far-minded and isolated, my uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful.

I was thirteen years old when my brother died. It happened in 1968. It was the end of term and we were expecting him home by the afternoon bus that passed through our village at three o'clock. My brother went to school at the mission where my uncle was headmaster and which was some twenty miles away from the village, to the west, in the direction of Umtali town. Sometimes, when my uncle was not too busy with reports and administration at the end of the school term, he was able to come away from his office at three o'clock in the afternoon, sacrificing the remaining hours in the day in order to bring Nhamo home. This was what Nhamo preferred. He did not like travelling by bus because, he said, it was too slow. Moreover, the women smelt of unhealthy reproductive odours, the children were inclined to relieve their upset bowels on the floor, and the men gave off strong aromas of productive labour. He did not like sharing the vehicle with various kinds of produce in suspicious stages of freshness, with frightened

hens, with the occasional rich-smelling goat. ‘We should have a special bus,’ he complained, ‘like they have for students who live in Fort Victoria and in Salisbury,’ quite forgetting that these were towns, autonomous urban centres, whereas our home was in the communal lands that surround Umtali, and that since my uncle’s mission was considered to be in Umtali there was no need to hire a bus in order to ferry him and the other pupil who lived in our area home.

Even so, hiring a bus would not have made the end of term comfortable enough for my brother. The bus terminus — which is also the market, with pale dirty tuckshops, dark and dingy inside, which we call magrosa, and women under msasa trees selling hard-boiled eggs, vegetables, seasonal fruit, boiled chicken which is sometimes curried and sometimes not, and anything else that the villagers or travellers might like to buy — is at least two miles distance from our homestead. Had a bus been hired or not my brother would still have had to walk the two miles home. This walk was another aspect of his homeward journey that my brother wished not to have to endure.

I, not having had to make the journey regularly each end of term and each beginning of a new term, could not understand why my brother disliked walking so much, especially after being cramped in an airless bus for such a long time: the bus journey to the mission took nearly an hour. Besides the relief of being able to stretch your legs after such a long journey, the walk home from the bus terminus was not a long wait when you had nowhere to hurry to. The road wound down by the fields where there were always some people with whom to pass ten minutes of the day — enquiring about their health and the health of their family, admiring the broad-leafed abundance of the maize crop when it was good, predicting how many bags the field would yield or wondering whether the plants had tasselled too early or too late. And although the stretch of road between the fields and the terminus was exposed to the sun and was, from September to April, except when it rained, harsh and scorching so that the glare from the sand scratched at your eyes, there was always shade by the fields where clumps of trees were

deliberately left standing to shelter us when we ate our meals or rested between cultivating strips of the land.

From the fields the road grew shadier with shrubs and trees. Acacia, lantana, msasa and mopani, clustered about on the other side. If you had time you could run off the road into more wooded areas to look for matamba and matunduru. Sweet and sour. Delicious. From this woody section the road rolled down into a shallow ravine, a river valley thoughtfully appointed along its floor with smooth, flat-topped boulders which made exciting equipment for all sorts of our childhood games. Across and around the lowest of these boulders, the river flowed sparsely in a dry season, but deeply enough in places when the rains were heavy to cover a child's head and to engulf me to my nipples. We learnt to avoid these places when the river flowed violently, but in most seasons it flowed placidly enough to permit bathing along most of its length. As children we were not restricted. We could play where we pleased. But the women had their own spot for bathing and the men their own too. Where the women washed the river was shallow, seldom reaching above my knees, and the rocks were lower and flatter there than in other places, covering most of the riverbed. The women liked their spot because it was sensibly architected for doing the laundry. But we were apprehensive about growing so big that we would have to wash there with the women and no longer be able to swim in the deeper, cooler, more interesting pools.

The river, the trees, the fruit and the fields. This was how it was in the beginning. This is how I remember it in my earliest memories, but it did not stay like that. While I was still quite young, to enable administration of our area, the Government built its District Council Houses less than a mile away from the places where we washed. Thus it became necessary for all the inhabitants of the dozen or so homesteads that made up our village to cross Nyamarira, as our river is called, whenever we went on business to the Council Houses. It was not long before the entrepreneurial among us, noticing that there were always more people gathered at the Council Houses than anywhere else in the village (except at church on Sundays and on other days in places where beer was being drunk),

built their little tuck-shops which sold the groceries we needed — bread, tea, sugar, jam, salt, cooking oil, matches, candles, paraffin and soap — there beside the Council Houses. I do not remember the exact sequence of this development, whether the place became a bus terminus before or after the tuckshops were built, but soon buses were stopping there too. Idle, the less industrious youth of the village began to loiter around the tuckshops, buying each other when they could afford to, which was not often, Fanta and Coca-Cola and perfume that smelt of vanilla essence, cheap at a tickey a bottle. An enterprising owner of one of the tuckshops, taking advantage of this, introduced a gramophone into his shop so that the youth could entertain themselves with music and dancing. They played the new rumba that, as popular music will, pointed unsystematic fingers at the conditions of the times: ‘I’ll beat you up if you keep asking for your money’, ‘Father, I am jobless, give me money for roora’, ‘My love, why have you taken a second wife?’. There was swaying of hips, stamping of feet to the pulse of these social facts. There was solidarity. The authorities became alarmed. Seeing how enterprising our community had been, they rewarded us for our efforts by building us a beer-hall, painted dark blue like the Council Houses, where ‘native beer’ and ‘clear beer’ were sold cheaply every day of the week. Thus our washing place became thoroughfares for people going to magrosa for all sorts of reasons. In the interests of decency bathing was relegated to further up the river. Nevertheless, when I was feeling brave, which was before my breasts grew too large, I would listen from the top of the ravine and, when I was sure I had felt no one coming, run down to the river, slip off my frock, which was usually all that I was wearing, and swim blissfully for as long as I dared in the old deep places.

This was the walk that my brother detested! Truly, I could continue endlessly describing the possibilities that were in that walk, so I could not understand why he was so resentful of it. Yet resentful he was, and most of the time he managed to avoid it by staying at the mission after the end of term on one pretext or another until my uncle, who is my father’s brother and the eldest

child in their family, decided that he would pay us a visit. My uncle visited us often.

It had been my uncle's idea that Nhamo should go to school at the mission. Nhamo, if given the chance, my uncle said, would distinguish himself academically, at least sufficiently to enter a decent profession. With the money earned in this way, my uncle said, Nhamo would lift our branch of the family out of the squalor in which we were living. Thus my uncle's gesture was oceanic, and my father, who liked hyperbole, did not need much persuading to see the sense of this plan. After only the mildest of polite hesitations, during which he reminded my uncle that Nhamo's departure would result in more work on the homestead for the rest of us, he agreed to let my brother go. This happened when my brother was in Standard Three, which was in 1965, the year of my uncle's return from England. By that time, the end of 1965, my brother had already begun to distinguish himself by coming top of the class in his first two years of primary school and staying in the top five thereafter. It was this tendency that my uncle, who had been excited by it, wished to develop. 'If I had your brains,' my father used to say to Nhamo by way of encouragement during my brother's early school years, his formative years, 'I would have been a teacher by now. Or maybe even a doctor. Ya! Maybe even a doctor. Do you think we would be living the way we are! No! In a brick house with running water, hot and cold, and lights, just like Mukoma. It would have been good, if only I had the brains.' Nhamo, who believed in filial obedience, used to agree with my father that indeed it would have been good and to reassure my father that the intelligence he had been blessed with would not be abused. I was different. I wanted to find out the truth. Did my father mean that Babamukuru was sharp at his lessons? I asked one day, overhearing one of these conversations.

'Not exactly that,' my father replied. 'I wouldn't say Mukoma was sharp. No. Not exactly sharp. But he used to read. Ha! Mukoma used to read. Whatever he touched he pushed, that's the way he was. I-i-h! Mukoma used to read,' he concluded, opening his mouth in a wide grimace, wrinkling his forehead in awe-filled tribute to my

uncle's perseverance. And then, realising the trap he had set for himself and fallen into, he was obliged to rescue himself. 'But Mukoma was lucky. He got the chance. He went to the mission at an early age. The missionaries looked after him so well, you know, that the books, ha-a-a, the books came naturally.'

Whether Babamukuru was sharp or industrious or merely lucky, Nhamo was usually able to cajole his uncle into driving him home. How Nhamo managed this is a mystery to me, because Babamukuru has never been the sort of person who is easily cajoled. Nevertheless, Nhamo could usually manage. But this time, this particular end of term that I am talking about in November 1968, when Nhamo had just completed his Standard Six and therefore finished early, Babamukuru was attending a meeting in town. Nhamo was obliged to take the bus. Actually I think Babamukuru had decided that it would be good for Nhamo to take the bus for a change. I think my uncle had begun to worry about the way in which my brother was developing. Certainly, all of us at home who were old enough to worry, all of us except my father that is, had begun to worry about Nhamo's development.

Very soon after going to the mission my brother stopped coming home to stay during the short vacations. Although he did visit occasionally with my uncle, he came back home to stay only once a year when the school year ended and the maize year began. During the April and August holidays Nhamo refused to come home, saying it was necessary to read his books ceaselessly in order to pass his examinations at the end of each year. This was a good argument. It enabled him to avoid the uncomfortable tasks of pulling down and stacking the maize and stripping the cobs of their leaves. We used to itch viciously at the end of each day during the maize harvest and run straight to the river from the fields to wash the itching away. It was not surprising that Nhamo did not like the harvest. None of us found it a pleasant task. It was just one of those things that had to be done. September and October were different. At this time the land was prepared for the new crop. In the beginning people used to dig the land with hoes, which was hard work but not uncomfortable and therefore not unenjoyable. Then, just before Babamukuru went

to England in 1960, he bought my father an ox-plough, so that by the time I was old enough to help in the fields, the work was reduced to planting the maize in the years that my father, or any visiting male relative who was strong enough, found time to use the ox-plough. In the years that they did not find the time, it was digging and planting as usual. After the planting, after the crop had germinated, all through the rainy season until the plants were tall and sturdy, we weeded, using our hands and our hoes. Sometimes it was not only maize but mhunga and rukweza as well. The beginning of the crop year was a busy time. My uncle insisted that Nhamo be home for it on the grounds that there were no examinations pending to justify his staying at the mission. Thus Nhamo was forced once a year to return to his squalid homestead, where he washed in cold water in an enamel basin or a flowing river, not in a bathtub with taps gushing hot water and cold; where he ate *sadza* regularly with his fingers and meat hardly at all, never with a knife and fork; where there was no light beyond the flickering yellow of candles and home-made paraffin lamps to enable him to escape into his books when the rest of us had gone to bed.

All this poverty began to offend him, or at the very least to embarrass him after he went to the mission, in a way that it had not done before. Before he went to the mission, we had been able to agree that although our squalor was brutal, it was uncompromisingly ours; that the burden of dispelling it was, as a result, ours too. But then something that he saw at the mission turned his mind to thinking that our homestead no longer had any claim upon him, so that when he did come home for his vacations, it was as if he had not: he was not very sociable. Helping in the fields or with the livestock or the firewood, any of the tasks he used to do willingly before he went to the mission, became a bad joke. When the rains came early at the end of his first year at the mission, he pointed out that most of the work had already been done and we had coped very well; when the rains came late, as they did at the end of his second year there, he reminded us that we had managed without him in the previous year. The only times that he would expend any energy to help around the homestead were the times

when Babamukuru sent word that he was coming to visit. On such days Nhamo would rise at dawn with the rest of us, working so hard that the dirt ingrained itself into the skin of his hands and the sweat ran down his bare back, leaving him smelling and looking for all the world like an archetypal labourer. His strategy was perfect. He never returned to the homestead, no matter how tedious and heavy the tasks at hand, until Babamukuru, having arrived home and found it deserted, drove down to the fields.

Sometimes Babamukuru wore shorts when he came to visit. If we were all at the fields on such an occasion he would take a hoe and join us for a while in our labours before driving back to the homestead with my father and Nhamo to listen to my father's progress report concerning how far behind we were with the sowing, the cultivating or the harvest; how the neighbours' cattle were plundering our fields; how Babamukuru should provide a barbed-wire fence to keep out the baboons as well as the cattle. When Babamukuru was not wearing shorts they would return to the homestead immediately. My mother, lips pressed tight, would hitch little Rambanai more securely on her back and continue silently at her labours. The ferocious swings of her arms as she grabbed and stripped a maize stalk restrained Netsai and me from making the slightest murmur of rebellion. We imagined those ferocious movements of our mother's arm sending a switch whistling down on our legs and this thought made us very diligent. Netsai turned on what I thought was an excessive amount of steam when mother grew silently ferocious. She would have outstripped me by an indecent number of yards, an embarrassingly high quota of cobs, if I hadn't been ashamed to lose face by letting my younger sister out-work me. We would follow in the tracks of my uncle's car when the sun began to set, herding the cattle back to their kraal as we went since there was no other young man in our family besides Nhamo to attend to this chore. We would travel as briskly as we could so that we would not be late in preparing the evening meal. Personally, I did not like to see Babamukuru in shorts, because in his mission clothes he was a dignified figure and that was how I liked to imagine him.

On the days that Babamukuru came to visit we killed a cock. Or rather, we killed a cock if there was one to spare, otherwise just a hen. We also killed a fowl on the occasions that Nhamo came home, whether he came with Babamukuru or whether he came alone. Netsai and I would corner the bird and catch it, eventually, after much frustrated grasping of air and feathers, encouraged in the chase by squeals of delight from little Rambanai, who often ended up crying when the bird flew away from us into her face.

On this particular November afternoon that we were expecting Nhamo home, my mother decided to water her vegetables — rape, *covo*, tomatoes, *derere* and onions — which she grew on a plot that had been my grandmother's, quite close to the homestead although still a quarter of an hour's walk away. We walked from the fields together, my mother and I, with the cattle, until we reached the vegetable garden, where we parted, she to her watering, I to the homestead, the cattle-whip in my hand but unused because the animals were as eager to be home as I was. Our shadows had already elongated thinly eastwards as the sun sank behind the hills. It was well past six o'clock. Being this late I was sure I would find Nhamo at home when I arrived, but when I walked up from the cattle kraal I saw only Rambanai and Netsai playing in the sandy yard around the kitchen. They were playing *nhodo*, which is to say that Netsai was playing and Rambanai, when it was her turn, was simply throwing the stone into the air and protesting loudly when Netsai resumed her turn. Rambanai was too young to throw a stone up into the air and pick up several other stones and then catch the first stone as it fell. Netsai knew this very well but enjoyed beating Rambanai at *nhodo* all the same.

As soon as Rambanai saw me she came running, complaining vehemently about Netsai's unfairness in her unintelligible language, so that it was only the look on her face that told me what she was saying.

'Hush, now,' I soothed, picking her up and settling her on my hip. 'I'll play *nhodo* with you. We'll have a good game. Did Nhamo send you for his luggage?' I asked Netsai.

‘No, Sisi Tambu,’ she answered. ‘*Mukoma* Nhamo has not yet come.’

‘He hasn’t yet come?’ I was not worried because the three o’clock bus was often a four o’clock or even a five o’clock bus. I was relieved too. I would not have to kill the cock. ‘Then maybe tomorrow, when Babamukuru will be able to give him a lift.’

Knowing Nhamo as I did, I knew he would not arrive home that late in the day on foot, for that would entail carrying his own luggage. Not that there was much of it, since he left his trunk at Babamukuru’s. He usually carried no more than a small bag containing his books plus one or two pairs of old khaki shorts, which were the only clothes he had that he was not afraid to spoil by wearing at home. Sometimes he carried a plastic bag as well, containing odds and ends like sugar and tea, and soap, toothbrush and toothpaste. The sugar and tea were more often than not a gift from my aunt to my mother although Nhamo kept them for himself. He would drink sweet black tea while he read his books and we went about our chores. This used to amuse my mother. When she caught him at it she would scold him off to herd the cattle, but when she related the incident she would laugh. ‘That boy and his books! He’ll make a fine teacher one of these days with all that reading!’

At any rate, Nhamo’s luggage was never too cumbersome for him to carry. All the same, he would not carry it all himself. Instead, he would leave something, a few books, a plastic bag, anything as long as there was something, at the shops at the bus terminus, for he was on friendly terms with everybody, so that he could send Netsai to fetch them as soon as he arrived home. When he was feeling gracious he would offer to mind Rambanai, who was still toddling, while Netsai ran the errand. When he was being himself he would smirk that minding children was not a man’s duty and Netsai, who was young although big for her age, would strap the baby to her back in order to fetch the luggage. Once or twice, because there was too much for her to manage on her own, I went with her. Knowing that he did not need help, that he only wanted to demonstrate to us and himself that he had the power, the authority to make us do

things for him, I hated fetching my brother's luggage. Because I was almost as big as he was and when I was angry could push a log from the fire into his face, he did not bully me too much, but Netsai compensated for whatever I got away with. Nhamo enjoyed taking a stick to her at the slightest excuse. To keep the peace I would accompany Netsai when she needed help, all the way to the shops muttering and fuming to both of us about our brother's laziness. You may wonder why I did not stand up for my sister, tell my brother to carry his own luggage. I did on the first occasion that he made Netsai run the errand. He agreed to go himself, then, when I had gone back into the kitchen, took Netsai out of earshot and gave her a sound whipping about the legs with a slender peach branch. Poor Netsai! She told me she ran all the way to the shops. And then she asked me why I had not let her go in the first place! At first I thought it was the beating that was making her ask such a silly question, but later I realised that she really did not mind carrying Nhamo's luggage if there wasn't too much of it. She was a sweet child, the type that will make a sweet, sad wife. As for Nhamo, he was very capable of convincing himself that Netsai would not carry the luggage if there was too much for her. So I did not mind helping her when necessary.

This was not all that was unpleasant about our brother. That Nhamo of ours had hundreds of unreasonable ideas. Even after all these years I still think that our home was healthier when he was away. I certainly thought so at the time. I remember feeling quite relieved on that November afternoon. Since I no longer had to kill a cock and prepare it, only the *sadza* and vegetables needed attention. This was no task at all, giving me the option of going back to the garden to help my mother. The thought of my mother working so hard, so alone, always distressed me, but in the end I decided to prepare the evening meal so that she would be able to rest when she returned. For I knew that if there was still work to be done when she finished her watering, she would tire herself further to do it.

'What is wrong, Sisi Tambur?' asked Netsai, bringing me out of my thoughts. Shifting Rambanai on to my left hip I found that my right knee had locked.

‘Wrong, Si’ Tam?’ queried Rambanai.

So typical of Netsai to ask a question I could not answer. I could not cold-bloodedly inform my sisters that I had been thinking of how much I disliked our brother. I felt guilty about it. As he was our brother, he ought to be liked, which made disliking him all the more difficult. That I still managed to do so meant I must dislike him very much indeed!

‘It will be good,’ I observed in an attempt to convince myself, ‘when *Mukoma* Nhamo comes home.’

‘Why?’ Netsai was puzzled. ‘What will he do?’

‘What do?’ echoed Rambanai, allowing me to laugh at her and so avoid answering. Putting her down I went to the *dara* to fill the enamel basin with water and to take the pots and plates I would need for my cooking. The *dara* was depressing. Termites had determinedly chewed their way right through one leg, so it stood tilted at an insolent angle, constantly letting things fall off it. As if that wasn’t enough, several of the bark thongs that tied the cross-planks together had rotted. The planks had shifted, leaving large gaps between them, so that when things did not fall off the *dara* they fell through it.

It must be fixed; I must fix it, I thought as I had thought a dozen times before, promising myself that I would make the time. I bent down to pull the ten-gallon drum that we used for storing water from under the *dara*, fervently hoping that there was enough water in it for the night.

Netsai was watching me. ‘It’s full,’ she smiled. ‘We used the tins. We only had to go three times to the river.’

‘Go river,’ agreed Rambanai.

‘You are a good worker,’ I told my sister, touched by her concern. Her pretty little face lit up from the inside. We smiled at each other and Rambanai chortled.

The *covo* was crisp and large-leafed, not requiring much washing. The pots were all clean, further evidence of Netsai’s considerate nature. I enjoyed preparing the food when the messier aspects had been taken care of. I hummed as I shredded the *covo* into the pot, was pleased when the chickens came to peck up the stray pieces,

cleaning up the place without the threat of being caught and prepared themselves! How I hated the whole process of enlisting Netsai's help to head off the bird's escape, growing irritable as I lunged for its wings and clutched empty air until finally I caught it, protesting and cackling in its strident voice until, sensing the inevitable, it was quiet. Nor could I bear the smell of blood that threatened to suffocate when boiling water was poured over the headless bird to loosen its feathers. Next time, I thought naïvely, Nhamo will catch it himself. If he wants to eat chicken, he will catch it and kill it. I will pluck it and cook it. This seemed a fair division of labour.

I thought naïvely. Netsai's beating because of the luggage should have made it clear to me that Nhamo was not interested in being fair. Maybe to other people, but certainly not to his sisters, his younger sisters for that matter. Perhaps I am being unfair to him, laying all this blame on him posthumously, when he cannot defend himself and when I have seen enough to know that blame does not come in neatly packaged parcels. Perhaps I am making it seem as though Nhamo simply decided to be obnoxious and turned out to be good at it, when in reality that was not the case; when in reality he was doing no more than behave, perhaps extremely, in the expected manner. The needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate. That was why I was in Standard Three in the year that Nhamo died, instead of in Standard Five, as I should have been by that age. In those days I felt the injustice of my situation every time I thought about it, which I could not help but do often since children are always talking about their age. Thinking about it, feeling the injustice of it, this is how I came to dislike my brother, and not only my brother, my father, my mother — in fact everybody.

Nhamo began school in the year that he turned seven. This was the age at which the Government had declared that African children were sufficiently developed cognitively to be able to understand the abstractions of numbers and letters: $1 + 1 = 2$; k-i-t-s-i = kitsi. Nhamo was one of the youngest pupils in his class. Perhaps other parents, believing that we really were a retarded lot, thought it best to let their children's abilities mature a little before exposing them to the rigours of formal education. And, of course, there was the question of fees. Whatever the reason, many of us did not begin school until we were eight or even nine years old, but the precedent of early entry had been set for our family by Babamukuru, who had obtained a Bachelor's Degree in South Africa and consequently knew a lot about education. 'They should go early,' Babamukuru told my father, 'while their minds are still malleable.' Inevitably, therefore, Nhamo began school in the year he turned seven and I followed the next since I was a year younger than him.

Now, for some reason that I do not ever remember understanding since we had fair rains that year, our crops were poor in the year that I began school. Although we harvested enough maize to keep us from starving, there was nothing left over to sell. This meant there was no money in the house. No money meant no school fees. No school fees meant no school. Nor was there any hope of procuring money since Babamukuru had left the mission to go to England to study more about education.

I was only five when Babamukuru went to England. Consequently, all I can remember about the circumstances surrounding his going is that everybody was very excited and very impressed by the event. Since then, in order to find out what really happened at that time so that I can understand what followed, I have asked many people — Maiguru and Babamukuru, my father, my mother, Nyasha and

Chido — to tell me what they recollect. I have discovered, as is not surprising, that there were debates and conflicts and tensions surrounding the departure that as a young child I could not have been aware of.

Babamukuru did not want to leave the mission. He did not want to go far from home again because he had already left his mother once, to go to South Africa, and had not been back long enough to see that she was settled and comfortable in her old age. In addition to this, he now had a family of his own. Although the missionaries who had offered him the scholarship to study in England had offered Maiguru a scholarship as well (so anxious were they that this intelligent, disciplined young couple be trained to become useful to their people), there was the question of the children. The debate and the tensions surrounding Babamukuru's departure centred not so much on the question of his going as on what to do with the children. Babamukuru was appreciative of the opportunity that had been offered; and further, to decline would have been a form of suicide. The missionaries would have been annoyed by his ingratitude. He would have fallen from grace with them and they would have taken under their wings another promising young African in his place. Unable to obtain the necessary qualifications at home, he had no alternative but to uproot himself for a period of five years in order to retain the position that would enable him, in due course, to remove himself and both his families from the mercy of nature and charitable missionaries. My grandmother thought the children would be better off at home, where our ways were familiar and they would be at ease in the family environment. But Babamukuru, remembering how difficult life was on the homestead, did not want his children to experience the want and hardship that he had experienced as a young child. In addition, he preferred to have his children with him so he could supervise essential things such as their education and their development. Therefore Chido and Nyasha were taken to England. My father, of course, thinking that five years without his brother to provide for him was a long time in which to be obliged to provide for himself, consoled himself with the knowledge that on Babamukuru's return with his high

qualifications, he would be provided for more abundantly than before. My mother was hopeful. She thought my father would at last grow responsible.

I remember discussing the phenomenon of Babamukuru's education with Nhamo. Nhamo was very impressed by the sheer amount of education that was possible. He told me that the kind of education Babamukuru had gone to get must have been of a very important sort to make him go all that way for it. 'England,' he told me with weighty authority, 'is very far away. It is much further away than South Africa.' How did he know?

Nhamo knew a lot of things in those days. He knew more than he did when he died. For instance, he knew that when he grew up he was going to study for many degrees like Babamukuru and become a headmaster like Babamukuru. He knew that it would be up to him to make sure that his younger sisters were educated, or look after us if we were not, just as Babamukuru had done and was doing for his own brothers and sister. He knew that he had to help in the fields and with the cattle and be pleasant to people. Above all, he knew that he had to work hard at school and keep coming top of the class. This latter he did diligently in Sub A and Sub B. He was particularly pleased with his Sub B result because he had beaten the next boy by only two marks. Then, having done so well, he was told he could not go to school any longer because there was no money for the fees. He cried.

Fortunately, my mother was determined in that year. She began to boil eggs, which she carried to the bus terminus and sold to passengers passing through. (This meant that we could not eat them.) She also took vegetables — rape, onions and tomatoes — extending her garden so that there was more to sell. Business was fair, and good during public holidays, when visitors from as far as Salisbury, Fort Victoria, Mount Darwin and Wankie would be tempted to buy a little extra to take home with them. In this way she scraped together enough money to keep my brother in school. I understood that selling vegetables was not a lucrative business. I understood that there was not enough money for my fees. Yes, I did understand why I could not go back to school, but I loved going to

school and I was good at it. Therefore, my circumstances affected me badly.

My father thought I should not mind. 'Is that anything to worry about? Ha-a-a, it's nothing,' he reassured me, with his usual ability to jump whichever way was easiest. 'Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables.'

His intention was to soothe me with comforting, sensible words, but I could not see the sense. This was often the case when my father spoke, but there had not before been such concrete cause to question his theories. This time, though, I had evidence. Maiguru was educated, and did she serve Babamukuru books for dinner? I discovered to my unhappy relief that my father was not sensible.

I complained to my mother. 'Baba says I do not need to be educated,' I told her scornfully. 'He says I must learn to be a good wife. Look at Maiguru,' I continued, unaware how viciously. 'She is a better wife than you!'

My mother was too old to be disturbed by my childish nonsense. She tried to diffuse some of it by telling me many things, by explaining that my father was right because even Maiguru knew how to cook and clean and grow vegetables. 'This business of womanhood is a heavy burden,' she said. 'How could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can't just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from a very early age. The earlier the better so that it is easy later on. Easy! As if it is ever easy. And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength.'

I thought about this for several days, during which I began to fear that I was not as intelligent as my Sub A performance had led me to believe, because, as with my father, I could not follow the sense of my mother's words. My mother said being black was a burden

because it made you poor, but Babamukuru was not poor. My mother said being a woman was a burden because you had to bear children and look after them and the husband. But I did not think this was true. Maiguru was well looked after by Babamukuru, in a big house on the mission which I had not seen but of which I had heard rumours concerning its vastness and elegance. Maiguru was driven about in a car, looked well-kempt and fresh, clean all the time. She was altogether a different kind of woman from my mother. I decided it was better to be like Maiguru, who was not poor and had not been crushed by the weight of womanhood.

‘I shall go to school again,’ I announced to my parents.

My father was sharp with me, thinking that I expected him to obtain the money somehow, perhaps by working. ‘Your nonsense, you are about to begin it! I can tell. You know your Babamukuru will not be home for a while yet!’

‘I will earn the fees,’ I reassured him, laying out my plan for him as I had laid it out in my own mind. ‘If you will give me some seed, I will clear my own field and grow my own maize. Not much. Just enough for the fees.’

My father was greatly tickled by this. He annoyed me tremendously by laughing and laughing in an unpleasantly adult way. ‘Just enough for the fees! Can you see her there?’ he chuckled to my mother. ‘Such a little shrub, but already making ripe plans! Can you tell your daughter, Ma’Shingayi, that there is no money. There is no money. That’s all.’

My mother, of course, knew me better. ‘And did she ask for money?’ she enquired. ‘Listen to your child. She is asking for seed. That we can give. Let her try. Let her see for herself that some things cannot be done.’

My father agreed. A little seed was not a large price to pay to keep me quiet. I began my project the next day, a day in December 1962. The next January my brother entered Standard One. I worked on the homestead, in the family fields and on my own plot. How I mumbled adoring, reverent prayers to my grandmother in those early days of my market gardening. My grandmother, who had been an inexorable cultivator of land, sower of seeds and reaper of rich

harvests until, literally until, her very last moment. When I was too small to be anything more than a hindrance in the family fields, I used to spend many productive hours working with my grandmother on the plot of land she called her garden. We hoed side by side strips of land defined by the row of maize plants each carried, I obstinately insisting I could keep pace with her, she weeding three strips to my one so that I could. Praising my predisposition towards working, she consolidated it in me as a desirable habit.

She gave me history lessons as well. History that could not be found in the textbooks; a stint in the field and a rest, the beginning of the story, a pause. 'What happened after, Mbuya, what happened?' 'More work, my child, before you hear more story.' Slowly, methodically, throughout the day the field would be cultivated, the episodes of my grandmother's own portion of history strung together from beginning to end.

'Your family did not always live here, did not move to this place until after the time that I was married to your grandfather. We lived up in Chipinge, where the soil is ripe and your great-grandfather was a rich man in the currency of those days, having many fat herds of cattle, large fields and four wives who worked hard to produce bountiful harvests. All this he could exchange for cloth and beads and axes and a gun, even a gun, from the traders. They did not come to stay in those days; they passed through and left. Your great-grandfather had sons enough to fill a kraal, as big, strong, hardworking men. And me, I was beautiful in those days,' her eyes twinkling at me so that I was ashamed of examining her so closely to find the woman she described. Why did she tell me this? She was not beautiful now, but I loved her, so I was ashamed that she saw me search for the lost beauty. 'I wasn't always this old, with wrinkles and grey hair, without teeth. At one time I was as small and pretty and plump as you, and when I grew into a woman I was a fine woman with hair so long you could plait it into a single row down the middle of my head. I had heavy, strong hips.' This is where she usually ended the first episode. I was on tenterhooks. The princess and the prince. What happened? What happened?

Wizards well versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land. On donkey, on foot, on horse, on ox-cart, the people looked for a place to live. But the wizards were avaricious and grasping; there was less and less land for the people. At last the people came upon the grey, sandy soil of the homestead, so stony and barren that the wizards would not use it. There they built a home. But the third-born son, my grandfather, lured by the wizards' whispers of riches and luxury and driven by the harshness of the homestead, took himself and his family to one of their wizards' farms. Yuwi! Only to find that they had been enticed into slavery. But one day my grandfather managed to escape to glittering gold mines in the south, where good men were said to be quickly made rich. The white wizard had no use for women and children. He threw my grandmother and her children off his farm. Destitute, they travelled back to the homestead, where my great-grandfather, although he had not regained his former standard of living, had managed to keep the family together. And then my great-grandfather died and the family broke up, and it turned out that my grandfather had not been a good man, for he was killed in the mines, and my grandmother was left with six children to support. And then she heard that beings similar in appearance to the wizards but not of them, for these were holy, had set up a mission not too far from the homestead. She walked, with my uncle, with Babamukuru, who was nine years old and wearing a loin cloth, to the mission, where the holy wizards took him in. They set him to work in their farm by day. By night he was educated in their wizardry. For my grandmother, being sagacious and having foresight, had begged them to prepare him for life in their world.

It was truly a romantic story to my ears, a fairy-tale of reward and punishment, of cause and effect. It had a moral too, a tantalising moral that increased your aspirations, but not beyond a manageable level.

My uncle was not afraid of hard work, having grown used to it from an early age on the farm and on the homestead. He surprised the missionaries by performing exceptionally well at school, in spite of putting in a full day's work on the farm. He was diligent, he was

industrious, he was respectful. They thought he was a good boy, cultivatable, in the way that land is, to yield harvests that sustain the cultivator. When he completed his Standards on the mission, they arranged for him to go to secondary school. This only became possible when a secondary school for people like my uncle had been built, which meant that he had to wait for some years in between. During this time and during his secondary-school years they gave him odd jobs at the mission so that he could pay his fees and help his family. Then the Government took over with a scholarship to South Africa. My uncle became prosperous and respected, well enough salaried to reduce a little the meagreness of his family's existence. This indicated that life could be lived with a modicum of dignity in any circumstances if you worked hard enough and obeyed the rules. Yes, it was a romantic story, the way my grandmother told it. The suffering was not minimised but the message was clear: endure and obey, for there is no other way. She was so proud of her eldest son, who had done exactly this.

When she died, which she did peacefully as she took a rest from her work on a day that I was not with her, my mother took over the plot and made it her vegetable garden. It was a big plot. My mother did not need the whole of it, so that half an acre or so lay fallow. This was the plot I chose for my field.

That year I grew older, stronger and sturdier than any eight year old can usefully grow. More often than not I woke up before dawn, the first lifting of the darkness occurring while I was sweeping the yard. Before it was fully light I would be on my way to the river and then returning along the footpath through the trees and past other homesteads, where the women were just waking, my water-drum balanced on my head-pad of leaves and green twigs, and the drum not quite full because when it was full it was too heavy for me to lift on to my head without help. While the cocks were crowing and the hens were shaking the sleep out of their feathers, I made the fire, swept the kitchen and boiled water for washing and for tea. By the time the sun rose I was in my field, in the first days hoeing and clearing; then digging holes thirty inches apart, with a single swing of the hoe, as we had been taught in our garden periods at school;

then dropping the seeds into them, two or three at a time, and covering them with one or two sweeps of my foot; then waiting for the seeds to germinate and cultivating and waiting for the weeds to grow and cultivating again. At about ten o'clock, which I judged by the height and heat of the sun, I would go to the family fields to work with my mother, sometimes my father and, in the afternoons after school, my brother.

I think my mother admired my tenacity, and also felt sorry for me because of it. She began to prepare me for disappointment long before I would have been forced to face up to it. To prepare me she began to discourage me. 'And do you think you are so different, so much better than the rest of us? Accept your lot and enjoy what you can of it. There is nothing else to be done.' I wanted support, I wanted encouragement; warnings if necessary, but constructive ones. On the day that she discouraged me once too often I decided she had been listening too devoutly to my father. Ceasing to pay attention to her, I sought solidarity with Nhamo instead, but he could not help because he was going to school.

'Why do you bother?' he asked, his eyes twinkling maliciously. 'Don't you know I am the one who has to go to school?'

'You said you would take care of me. Help me in my field.'

'How can you ask when you see I am so busy?'

This was true. With the herd staying in the kraal until he came home from school in the afternoon to take them out to graze and to water before joining us in the fields; with milking before school and after when a cow was in milk; with his books; with my father in the busy times insisting that he help us all day, so that sometimes he missed as much as a week of school at a time; with all these tasks and odd jobs here and there he was very busy. I opened my mouth to say I would take over the milking and the grazing, but self-preservation was stronger than compassion. I closed my mouth without saying the words. Still, I had to do something about my brother's plight.

'Will he concentrate if he is so busy?' I asked my father.

'Why not, if he wants to?'

My mother was right. Some things could not be done.

Nhamo laughed when I related my story. ‘So what! I don’t care what he says,’ he shrugged, shocking me with this disrespectful language that I had not heard before. ‘I’m at school, aren’t I? It doesn’t worry me what he says about me. So what’s your problem? It doesn’t even affect you.’

‘But you can’t study.’

‘Who says? I should know. I go to school. You go nowhere.’

‘But I want to go to school.’

‘Wanting won’t help.’

‘Why not?’

He hesitated, then shrugged. ‘It’s the same everywhere. Because you are a girl.’ It was out. ‘That’s what Baba said, remember?’ I was no longer listening. My concern for my brother died an unobtrusive death.

By February my maize was dark green, taller than me and still growing. I strutted about as I inspected my crop as though I owned a hundred-hectare farm. Nor was I overtired these days, because the fields no longer needed much attention. It was a fine feeling. A fine crop. All that remained was to wait for the harvest — cultivate once or twice, but really, wait for the harvest to harvest my fine little crop. Fine little crop. I had to be careful in thinking about the harvest in case I was discouraged. I had to push away the knowledge that I could not earn much from my crop.

A few weeks later, when the cobs were ripe for eating, they began to disappear.

‘What did you expect?’ Nhamo said. ‘Did you really think you could send yourself to school?’

The Sunday after my mealies began to be stolen I decided to go to church. Sunday was hardly ever a day of rest with us, and even more rarely a day of worship. Often my mother, not daring to sin as grotesquely as going to the field, would nevertheless work her garden on a Sunday. Or if there was little enough work to allow her to stay at home with a clear conscience, she was too tired to clean herself up and walk the two and a half miles to church. During the

year in which I had gone to school I had found myself going to church more and more frequently, because children who had not attended Sunday School were caned on Monday, or put to work in the teachers' gardens. Without the prospect of caning to push me, I had hardly been to church since I left school. But this particular Sunday, the Sunday after my mealies began to disappear, I craved for the games we played at Sunday School. I desperately needed the laughter, the light-heartedness and the camaraderie. I went to the river, washed myself carefully and changed into my good dress, which had holes nowhere except under the armpits and there only because I had grown too big for it. I rubbed a lot of vaseline on to my legs, my arms, my face and into my hair. Then I was sorry for the waste, because it only meant I would get very dusty very quickly. By the time I arrived at Rutivi School, my old school, where the services were held, the games had already begun. The girls were already at *pada* in the road where a stick would scratch the boxes into the dust, and the boys were energetically kicking about a football made of plastic and newspaper on the meagrely-grassed football pitch. The girls were pleased to see me, to have me with them again. It was just like the old days. I had a turn immediately.

'We think of you,' said Nyari, who had been my best friend, as I threw my *pada*. 'Especially when Nhamo gives us mealies,' she said with a sigh. 'They are fun to roast after class. If only you were here.'

The blood prickled under my skin. I hopped precariously into square number eight.

'You are out,' said Chitsva. 'You did not kick the *pada*.'

'Nhamo gave you maize?' I asked on one leg in square number eight.

'Lots of times,' Nyari assented.

They told me I took off from the *pada* game like a dog after a buck. I remember at one moment playing *pada*, the next Nhamo and I rolling about in the dirt of the football pitch, a group of excited peers egging us on. They said I went straight for my brother and brought him down in a single charge. The element of surprise was on my side. I sat on top of him, banged his head into the ground, screamed and spat and cursed. Nhamo heaved. I fell off him. He

pinned me to the ground, not striking, only holding me there, the malicious twinkle back in his eye. 'What's the matter with you?' he drawled. 'Have you gone mad?' The crowd laughed.

'Why talk?' a footballer shouted. 'Just hit. That's what they hear.'

I hissed and spat and screamed and cursed some more, and kicked and broke free, backing away into the crowd, which parted to let me through. I charged again, intending this time to kill, and instead found myself struggling in mid-air at the end of an adult arm.

Mr Matimba was very cross with everybody. 'I am ashamed of you,' he shouted above my screams, 'of all of you. Nhamo, if you are going to fight your sister, who will look after her? And you, Tambudzai, must also behave better. The rest of you, the rest of you stand there clapping as though you were at a football game. What's wrong with you?'

'She started it,' Nhamo said lazily, watchfully.

'Yes,' chorused everybody. 'She charged. We saw it. She just charged for no reason at all.'

I screamed out my reasons at the top of my lungs.

'What is she saying?' asked Nyari, who was looking serious. 'Does she want mealies?'

'If I ever see anything like this again,' continued Mr Matimba, 'I will whip you, every one of you. A stick will break about each person's legs. Now go, all of you. Sunday School is over.' They melted away; Mr Matimba was known not to speak in vain. 'And you, child,' he said sternly, 'what were you doing causing such a scene?'

A warm liquid trickled down my leg. I might have wet myself, but it was red and sticky on the outside of the leg, not colourless and watery on the inside. I could not feel the cut. Tears of impotent rage threatened to decompose me. I blinked them back and told Mr Matimba that Nhamo had stolen my mealies.

'What mealies are these?' asked Mr Matimba, patient if puzzled. I told him the whole story, how I was going to come back to school the following year, how I was going to earn the money by selling my crop. Mr Matimba listened attentively. At some point during my speech, which was long because it was not very coherent and Mr

Matimba had to keep asking me questions, we began to walk around the football pitch. Mr Matimba listened hard, inclining his whole person towards me; I talked to him as though he were just another person and not an adult and a teacher. I felt myself re-coalesce.

‘You would do better to sell them green,’ Mr Matimba suggested when I had finished. ‘It would fetch you more money.’

‘But everybody has green maize to eat,’ I objected. ‘Ho-o-o! You are saying I should go to the bus-stop?’

‘That is possible,’ answered Mr Matimba, ‘but I was thinking that you should sell to the Whites. When the cobs are fat and heavy, they buy them for as much as sixpence each.’

I did not believe him. Nobody had that much money, not even Babamukuru.

‘If you took your green mealies to town,’ continued Mr Matimba, ‘you might make enough for a couple of terms’ fees. After that, we would have to see.’

‘But I cannot get to town,’ I pointed out. I shrugged. ‘I shall take my mealies to magrosa.’

‘Perhaps you will not have to,’ Mr Matimba said, smiling in a conspiratorial way. ‘On Tuesdays I take the school truck into town for school business. If you come to my house at eleven o’clock on Tuesday, I will take you there and we will see what can be done. But make sure to ask your father for permission.’

My father said Mr Matimba was behaving irresponsibly and interfering in matters that did not concern him. ‘Does he think he is your father?’ he enquired. ‘He thinks that because he has chewed more letters than I have, he can take over my children. And you, you think he is better than me. He wants somebody to work in his garden, that’s what he wants. I forbid you to go.’

‘But I must sell my maize,’ I insisted.

‘Were you intending all this time to go and sell it in town, ha? Is that it?’ my father asked sarcastically, hurtfully. ‘Ma’Shingayi,’ he ordered my mother, ‘tell this child of yours she cannot go to town with that man.’

‘And why should I tell her such things?’ my mother asked. ‘The girl must have a chance to do something for herself, to fail for

herself. Do you think I have not told her her efforts will come to nothing? You know your daughter. She is wilful and headstrong. She won't listen to me. I am tired of telling her things to which she pays no attention,' she whined. 'She must see these things for herself. If you forbid her to go, she will always think you prevented her from helping herself,' she continued, recovering her sense of direction. 'She will never forget it, never forgive you.'

Words like 'always' and 'never' were meaningful to my father, who thought in absolutes and whose mind consequently made great leaps in antagonistic directions when it leapt at all. 'Then let her go,' he said.

That is how on the Tuesday I kept my appointment with Mr Matimba. I climbed into the school truck beside him. My basket of maize was on my lap, neatly covered with brown paper. The other children, who had finished their lessons, watched me, envy written so clearly on their faces that I felt I had scored a significant victory even if I did not sell any maize.

'Bye-bye.' I waved as we drove off. 'Next year I will not be able to go to town because I will be with you behind the desk!' Mr Matimba laughed at me more nicely than most adults can. I laughed too, because his laugh was infectious and because I was excited about the trip and pleased with him and pleased with myself.

I had never ridden in a motor vehicle before. I was inundated by new sensations: the soft plastic seat that made me sweat, sticking my dress to my buttocks; the bumps in the road that were worse than they were when Nyari's father's ox-cart rolled over them. I asked Mr Matimba about this:

'Why are the roads for cars so bumpy? The roads for carts are not so bad.'

'The roads are equally bumpy,' he explained. 'But a car moves more quickly than an ox-cart, so we feel the bumps more when we are in a car.'

So the bumps were the same! Were they really?

I was concerned when we came to the river. 'How will the car swim?'

‘The wheels will move on the bottom of the river,’ Mr Matimba explained affably. ‘It is just like the way you walk across when the river is not too deep.’ I was intrigued by all these new ideas.

The tarmac road with the white stripes down the middle was another wonder to be explained.

‘Why do you stay on one side when there is the whole road?’ I asked Mr Matimba. A dairy truck roared towards us and past us in the opposite direction. ‘I know, I know,’ without waiting for his answer. ‘Cars that are going to town use this side. Cars that are coming from town use the other side. That’s so they don’t bump into each other!’ Mr Matimba complimented me. He said I was sharp. I felt that I was, but did not say so.

‘Umtali is on the other side of these mountains,’ Mr Matimba said as we approached the intersection of the Inyanga Highway with the Umtali Road. ‘The mountains around here are some of the highest mountains in Rhodesia. All the high mountains are found here in the eastern part of our country. These are things you will learn about when you come back to school.’

The road began to climb upwards on the shoulder of the hill. The truck faltered, and changed its voice and moved more slowly.

‘The white people must be very strong to build such a wide road so high up,’ I observed.

Mr Matimba did not think so. ‘We did the building,’ he told me. ‘It was a terrible job. We did many terrible jobs. Now we are approaching the top of Christmas Pass,’ he said, changing the subject. ‘Look down when we get to the other side and you will see something worth seeing.’

I looked and saw, neatly laid out below us, a very small town with rows of small houses which grew smaller and smaller as they stretched to the north-west.

‘That is Umtali,’ Mr Matimba said, ‘Rhodesia’s third largest town. Only Salisbury, which is the capital city, and Bulawayo are larger than Umtali. These are more things that you will learn. One day I will bring you here at night. Then it is very beautiful, because the lights of the town are like hundreds of stars below you instead of above.’

Stars below instead of above! I wanted to see them straight away. I prayed for a miracle, for the sun to set.

We rumbled down the pass. There were many more cars now in different shapes and sizes and colours, some in front of us, some behind and some beside us. Some were going into town like we were, others were going back up the pass. Then the road split up, branching into every direction, and the cars came and went in all directions too. I became quite frightened that one of them would move off in the wrong direction and come crashing into us, but Mr Matimba was quite relaxed. How clever of him to make the car go where he wanted it to when there were so many confusing ways it might take.

‘We will go to a place where there are many large shops and a place where the white people leave their cars,’ he told me as we moved slowly up the road. ‘I will stay with you for a little while to show you what to do, then I will leave you for some time to do my own business.’ I would have been frightened of being alone if I had thought about it.

We drove up the wide street curiously guarded by lights on a pole. When the top light was burning all the cars stopped. When the bottom light came on, we all moved again! I wondered how the lights knew to switch themselves on and off.

‘They are controlled by machine,’ Mr Matimba said, less precise than he had been in answering my questions until now. ‘You will learn about them in Standard One, when you read about Ben and Betty in Town and Country.’

It became evident to me that I had no alternative but to sell my maize and go back to school.

Mr Matimba stopped the truck at the corner of the street beyond the lights. We dismounted and walked to the side of a large shop mainly made out of glass.

‘Keep well back against the wall so that you don’t get into anyone’s way,’ Mr Matimba instructed me. ‘Now,’ he continued, ‘try to make your mealies look appetising. Take off the brown paper.’

I did as I was told and was inspired to take out half a dozen cobs, which I arranged around my basket, propping them against the rim.

‘Excuse me, Madam,’ Mr Matimba said in English, in the softest, slipperiest voice I had ever heard him use, speaking to an old white woman who walked arm in arm with her husband. ‘Excuse me, Madam, we are selling green mealies, very soft, very fresh, very sweet.’

Smiling brightly, I held two cobs out while my stomach rolled itself into tight, nervous knots. I did not like the way they looked, with their skin hanging in papery folds from their bones, malignant-looking brown spots on their hands, a musty, dusty, sweetish odour clinging around the woman like a haze. Making sure not to wrinkle my nose, because these were the people who had the money that I needed to go back to school, I smiled more broadly, showing all my teeth, and said, ‘Nice maize, good maize. Nice, good,’ I repeated, because I had no more English adjectives with which to describe my produce.

The old woman looked at me, shaking her head. ‘Ts-ts-ts-ts!’ she clicked.

‘Come, Doris,’ the man said, anxiously grasping her elbow. ‘We don’t need any mealies.’

‘Shocking, simply shocking,’ protested Doris. ‘I’d be shocking myself if I walked by and didn’t say anything, George! Oi, young man, yes you!’ she said, raising her voice to address Mr Matimba. ‘Is she your little girl?’ Without waiting for an answer she gave him a piece of her mind. ‘Child labour. Slavery! That’s what it is. And I’m sure you don’t need to make the poor mite work. You are natty enough, but look at the mite, all rags and tears.’

Doris’ husband turned down the corners of his mouth at Mr Matimba, apologetically, embarrassed, annoyed.

‘Come now, Doris, it’s none of our business.’

This appeared to be the opinion of the other Whites in the street. They crossed over before they reached us. Some did walk by, but I think they did not speak English; in fact no one spoke at all except for one beefy youth.

‘What’s the matter, lady? The munt being cheeky?’

A crowd of black people gathered. ‘What’s the matter with the old ones?’ asked a young man in sunglasses and a tweed cap

irrepressibly set over one eye. He spiked the beefy youth with a vigilant eye. I was obliged to tell him that I did not know because I did not speak English. But, I assured him, I was going to learn English when I went back to school.

Doris would not keep quiet. 'The child ought to be in school, learning her tables and keeping out of mischief,' she railed. 'Now, don't tell me there aren't any schools, young man, because I know the Governor is doing a lot for the natives in the way of education.'

'They're kaffirs,' interjected the youth. 'They don't want to learn anything. Too much like hard work.'

'Speak up for yourself, now,' Doris commanded Mr Matimba.

Mr Matimba did speak for himself. He spoke most sorrowfully and most beseechingly. Doris darkened like a chameleon. Money changed hands, paper money from Doris' hands to Mr Matimba's. The beefy youth was disgusted. 'That's more than two crates of *shumba*. Wasted on a kaffir!' Doris allowed her husband to lead her away. I offered my basket, repeating my slogan, for her to choose the biggest cobs. She patted my head and called me a plucky piccannin.

Some of the crowd cheered, saying she was more human than most of her kind. Others muttered that white people could afford to be, in fact ought to be, generous.

'What is good is not given,' warned the man in the cap. 'What will she do when the money runs out. Look for another old White?' He spat on the pavement. I did not know why he was so angry, but Mr Matimba was smiling conspiratorially, so I knew that everything was all right.

'There is no reason to stay,' he said. 'Pack the maize and we will go.' I did as I was told, although I was worried that we had not sold any maize. In the truck Mr Matimba explained what had happened, how Doris had accused him of making me work instead of sending me to school and how he had told her that I was an orphan, taken in by my father's brother but, being the thirteenth child under their roof, had not been sent to school for lack of fees. He had said that I was very clever, very hardworking and was selling mealies to raise my school fees with his assistance. He told me that Doris had

commended him for trying to help me, had donated ten pounds towards my school fees. He showed me the money, the crisp clean note. Ten pounds. We never even talked about that much money at home. Now here I was holding it in my hands! The money, the money, no thought for the method.

‘It is a lot of money,’ Mr Matimba agreed. ‘What will you do with it?’

‘I will take it home and keep it, and then I will use it to pay my school fees, next year and the year after and the year after.’

Mr Matimba was dubious. ‘Money is a difficult thing to keep, especially when it is scarce. We must arrange something. I think you will give the money to the headmaster. He will give you a receipt, which I will keep for you, and then from the first term of next year onwards he will deduct your school fees from the money until it is finished.’

That is what happened. My parents did not believe me when I told them how much money I had in the headmaster’s keeping. Nor did my brother. He thought I was making it up. ‘Lies won’t get you to school,’ he mocked.

My father was more active in his disapproval, although, of course, I did not know why he disapproved. He went to see the headmaster, who confirmed my story.

‘Then you have taken my money,’ my father told the headmaster. ‘That money belongs to me. Tambudzai is my daughter, is she not? So isn’t it my money?’ This was a difficult problem for the headmaster, who was an honest man. Eventually he showed my father the receipt.

‘I have not stolen your money,’ he said. ‘See, your daughter’s name is on the receipt. It is her money, not mine. The school is only keeping it for her.’

The argument grew so heated that Mr Matimba was called in, to give evidence and also to be prosecuted.

‘He is the real thief,’ said my father. ‘He is the one who influenced my daughter to pay the money to you.’

‘You forget,’ Mr Matimba reminded him, ‘that I was the one who was given the money by the white woman and that it was given to

me so that your daughter's fees could be paid. If you do not see this, it is a matter for the Sabhuku to settle.'

My father was intimidated but not appeased. 'This is only ten pounds that we are quarrelling over,' Mr Matimba continued. 'What good can it do you besides wetting your throat with a few pots of maseke? But one day, when Tambudzai has done well in her studies, she will earn more than ten pounds a month.'

'Have you ever heard of a woman who remains in her father's house?' growled my father. 'She will meet a young man and I will have lost everything.'

But the receipt remained in the headmaster's office. That year there were plenty of green mealies to boil and roast and eat as we pleased.

I went back to school the following year, although I had to go back into Sub A. I came first that year and people said it was because I had been repeating, which might have been true. I was top of my class again the next year in Sub B. That time people said it was because I was older. My brother took particular pains to point this out to me, because in that year, when he was in Standard Three, he only managed to come fourth. For all his nonchalance, I knew he was upset, so I reminded him that fourth was a very good position to take.

Babamukuru and his family returned from England when I was in Sub B, the year that my brother came fourth in Standard Three. My father had always been ingratiating in Babamukuru's presence. Even so, the performance he staged on the occasion of my uncle's return was magnificent by anybody's standards. Money was found, I expect through begging since this was something that my father had developed an aptitude for, having had to do it often. He was very good at it by that time. '*Vakomana, vakomana,*' he must have said, holding his head in his hands and shaking it, possibly even striking his forehead with the flat of his palm. 'Did you ever see the like of the things that are happening here at your home? I would never have thought it possible myself. That Mukoma could actually pack

his things and leave the mission to go to overseas, stay there for five years and come back with a degree, with a degree, to find nothing, not even a goat, on his return! Tsha — a! I didn't think it could happen! It shames me truly, it shames me.

'Look, see how your home is. We impress people around here. Who built the first baked-brick house in this area? Who has such a bright corrugated-iron roof that it can be seen twinkling as far as the main road? *Mukoma*! Let me tell you, *Mukoma* did this for us. We impress people because of *Mukoma*. And we can't even kill a goat for him. See, *hama dzangu*, how poverty degrades us. It stops us welcoming our own flesh and blood. Ts-hm-m!' he must have sighed nasally, 'we cannot manage celebrations and *Mukoma* will arrive at an empty airport — I don't even have the bus fare to Salisbury.' There would have been a pause then. '*Hama dzangu*, can you not help me? I have forgotten about the goat, but five bob, just *five* bob for the bus? *Mukoma* will give you your money when he comes.' My father is the sort of person to whom people decide not to lend money only after they have already done so. I can imagine the ferreting about in old mattresses, the furtive unblocking by moonlight of small holes in mud-brick walls, the unearthing at dusk of shallowly buried coffee tins that this speech caused. However it came about, ultimately the money was acquired. Babamukuru was to be welcomed at the airport.

My brother was to accompany my father on the trip and exaggerated his anticipation of the event for my benefit by asking rhetorically in my presence very silly questions. Was the roar of an aeroplane so loud it would deafen? Was it in fact a leonine roar or did it sound more like a giant bee-fly? How did an aeroplane flap its wings when it was close to the ground? Naturally, I would not answer.

They were to take the night train from Umtali to Salisbury, travelling, uncomfortably, in fifth class. Although the most practical, for there was nowhere to stay in Salisbury, this itinerary added an entire extra day to the trip. The problem was to get to the railway station in time for the train's departure, which happened between eight o'clock and nine o'clock in the evening. This should have been

straightforward enough, but the buses to town passed through the village irregularly and according to an unreliable timetable. As a result trips had to be planned by the day rather than by the hour. For these reasons my father and Nhamo decided to travel to Umtali by the early morning bus, which was scheduled to, but did not often, stop at our bus terminus at half past six every morning. When it did arrive at all, it would arrive randomly an hour later or earlier than scheduled, and even then it was likely to be filled to capacity: you could tell because the inside looked black even at a distance of, say, twenty yards. Therefore, the logistics of the journey had to be carefully planned. There was a long and loose-ended debate about whether to spend the night at home, which necessitated an early start in the morning, or to sleep at my aunt's homestead since she lived nearer to the terminus than we did. Baba and Nhamo were, of course, in favour of the latter arrangement, but my mother irrationally pointed out that though my aunt would feed them well while they were at her homestead, she could not be expected to provide for the journey as generously as my mother would. They should not blame her, my mother said, if they slept at my aunt's homestead only to die of hunger on the train. The point was taken. Father and Nhamo decided to bivouac at my aunt's the night before their departure, and have me take them the provisions that my mother would have prepared in the morning. They agreed that I would take the provisions to the bus-stop rather than to my aunt's home in case I was slow on the way and reached my aunt's home after they had departed.

My mother had miscalculated. She had hoped that by seeming to dissuade them from spending an extra night away from home, she would ensure that they did so and thus be free of them for a while longer. This she had achieved, but she also landed herself with the impracticable and strenuous task of finding the provisions. They wanted cornbread, because white bread from the shops did not remain long in the stomach while yesterday's *sadza* stayed there too long, and sweet potatoes and chicken. My mother was offended. 'But these men don't think,' she complained. 'They know very well that no corn was planted, so where does the cornmeal come from? And

sweet potatoes, which I finished putting down only yesterday because I planted single-handed! As for their chicken, if they really want it, what will they cook for Babamukuru when he comes?’

The crisis was resolved in the usual manner. I fetched cornmeal from my aunt’s, having first tried the neighbours and found none, though when I explained to them why the cornmeal was needed they gave me peanuts instead. The sweet potatoes did not ripen in time, but the day before the trip news reached us by telephone message via the Council Houses that Babamukuru had sent money for a goat. Thus Baba and Nhamo were, in effect, able to have their chicken and eat it.

It was a very complicated journey that my father and Nhamo were undertaking. Complicated, therefore exciting. I wanted to be part of it. I wanted to juggle with transport timetables as well. I wanted to eat fresh cornbread, ashy roast peanuts and salty boiled chicken on the train at midnight too. Above all, I wanted to be as deafened as anyone by the roar and the buzz (was it a roar or a buzz?) of the aeroplanes. My yearning to go must have shown, probably on my face as I listened to them make their plans and undo them and make them again, because my father called me aside to implore me to curb my unnatural inclinations: it was natural for me to stay at home and prepare for the homecoming.

My father’s idea of what was natural had begun to irritate me a long time ago, at the time that I had had to leave school. I used to try to avoid having it explained to me by maintaining a sullen silence, which according to my father was also unnatural: ‘Now that the mouth is shut, the heart is proud.’ He would threaten to beat me but, preferring to be lazy, never bothered to catch me when I ran.

I was fortunate that my father was so obviously impossible, otherwise I would have been confused. Under the circumstances the situation was clear: there was no way of pleasing my father, nor was there any reason to. Relieved, I set about pleasing myself, which antagonised him even further. He did not like to see me over-absorbed in intellectual pursuits. He became very agitated after he had found me several times reading the sheet of newspaper in which the bread from magrosa had been wrapped as I waited for the *sadza*

to thicken. He thought I was emulating my brother, that the things I read would fill my mind with impractical ideas, making me quite useless for the real tasks of feminine living. It was a difficult time for him because Mr Matimba had shown him that in terms of cash my education was an investment, but then in terms of cattle so was my conformity. In frustration he resorted to absolutes. Ignoring Babamukuru's imminent homecoming, he threatened to take me out of school again. It was a thoughtless threat: how could he have done that? Not having the power, he left me alone. We co-existed in peaceful detachment.

Babamukuru came home in a cavalcade of motor vehicles, sighted four miles away on the main road by three jubilant pairs of eyes. Netsai and I and little Shupikai, whose mother was one of the relatives gathered to celebrate the occasion of Babamukuru's return, watched as the cavalcade progressed, distressingly slowly, now disappearing behind clumps of trees, now reappearing hours later, or so it seemed, no more than a few hundred yards nearer. The vigil lasted twenty minutes. We watched from a rock on the hill behind the homestead until the cars disappeared for the last time into the home-stretch. Then we went wild. We slid off our rock, skinning elbows and knees on the way, scrambled oblivious through bushes that scratched our legs, dashed out on to the road and ran on. 'Ba-ba-mu-ku-ru! Ba-ba-mu-ku-ru!' we chanted, running and jumping and waving our skinny arms about all at the same time, skirts swirling, bottoms jutting as we capered. Shupikai, several yards behind, started to cry, still tottering along and chanting through her sobs, because we had left her behind and because she was excited. Her crisis was so inconvenient. I considered ignoring her, which could not be done. Dashing back, I snatched her up to continue the mad welcome with her perched on my hip.

My aunt Gladys, the one who is my father's womb-sister, older than him but younger than Babamukuru, came first, her husband behind the wheel of a gallant if rickety old Austin. They hooted long and loud. We waved and shouted and danced. Then came Babamukuru, his car large and impressive, all sparkling metal and polished dark green. It was too much for me. I could have clambered on to the bonnet but, with Shupi in my arms, had to be content with a song: '*Mauya, mauya. Mauya, mauya. Mauya, Babamukuru!*' Netsai picked up the melody. Our vocal cords vibrating through wide arcs, we made an unbelievable racket.

Singing and dancing we ushered Babamukuru on to the homestead, hardly noticing Babamunini Thomas, who brought up the rear, not noticing Mainini Patience, who was with him, at all.

Slowly the cavalcade progressed towards the yard, which by now was full of rejoicing relatives. My father jumped out of Babamukuru's car and, brandishing a staff like a victory spear, bounded over the bumpy road, leaping into the air and landing on one knee, to get up and leap again and pose like a warrior inflicting a death wound. '*Hezvo!*' he cried. 'Do you see him? Our returning prince. Do you see him? Observe him well. He has returned. Our father and benefactor has returned appeased, having devoured English letters with a ferocious appetite! Did you think degrees were indigestible? If so, look at my brother. He has digested them! If you want to see an educated man, look at my brother, big brother to us all!' The spear aimed high and low, thrust to the right, to the left. All was conquered.

The cars rolled to a stop beneath the mango trees. Tete Gladys disembarked with difficulty, with false starts and strenuous breathing; because she was so large, it was not altogether clear how she had managed to insert herself into her car in the first place. But her mass was not frivolous. It had a ponderous presence which rendered any situation, even her attempts to remove herself from her car, weighty and serious. We did not giggle, did not think of it. On her feet at last, Tete straightened herself, planted herself firmly, feet astride, in the dust. Clenched fists settling on hips, elbows jutting aggressively, she defied any contradiction of my father's eulogy. 'Do you hear?' she demanded, 'what Jeremiah is saying? If you have not heard, listen well. It is the truth he is speaking! Truly our prince has returned today! Full of knowledge. Knowledge that will benefit us all! Purururu!' she ululated, shuffling with small gracious jumps to embrace my mother. 'Purururu!' they ululated. 'He has returned. Our prince has returned!'

Babamukuru stepped out of his car, paused behind its open door, removed his hat to smile graciously, joyfully, at us all. Indeed, my Babamukuru had returned. I saw him only for a moment. The next minute he was drowned in a sea of bodies belonging to uncles, aunts

and nephews; grandmothers, grandfathers and nieces; brothers and sisters of the womb and not of the womb. The clan had gathered to welcome its returning hero. His hand was shaken, his head was rubbed, his legs were embraced. I was there too, wanting to touch Babamukuru, to talk, to tell him I was glad that he had returned. Babamukuru made his fair-sized form as expansive as possible, holding his arms out and bending low so that we all could be embraced, could embrace him. He was happy. He was smiling. 'Yes, yes,' he kept saying. 'It is good, it is good.' We moved, dancing and ululating and kicking up a fine duststorm from our stamping feet, to the house.

Babamukuru stepped inside, followed by a retinue of grandfathers, uncles and brothers. Various paternal aunts, who could join them by virtue of their patriarchal status and were not too shy to do so, mingled with the men. Behind them danced female relatives of the lower strata. Maiguru entered last and alone, except for her two children, smiling quietly and inconspicuously. Dressed in flat brown shoes and a pleated polyester dress very much like the one Babamukuru bought for my mother the Christmas before he left, she did not look as though she had been to England. My cousin Nyasha, pretty bright Nyasha, on the other hand, obviously had. There was no other explanation for the tiny little dress she wore, hardly enough of it to cover her thighs. She was self-conscious though, constantly clasping her hands behind her buttocks to prevent her dress from riding up, and observing everybody through veiled vigilant eyes to see what we were thinking. Catching me examining her, she smiled slightly and shrugged. 'I shouldn't have worn it,' her eyes seemed to say. Unfortunately, she had worn it. I could not condone her lack of decorum. I would not give my approval. I turned away.

I remember disapproving of my cousin Chido as well as Nyasha that day, although I do not know why I disapproved of Chido, who was innocuously if smartly dressed in shorts and shoes and socks. I think it was not anything to do with him as a person, but with the fact that he was Nyasha's brother. As for my own brother, I was thoroughly disgusted with him. Nhamo took after my father in the

way that he could effuse over anything that was necessary, over many things at the same time if that was necessary too. Therefore I was not surprised when he suddenly stopped leaping in the central regions of Babamukuru's domain in order to stake his claim on our clean, kempt cousins. He had an awful lot to say to them, but I was sure that the English he was using was broken. This was probably why he did not succeed very well in his attempts to draw them into conversation. The girl, while not actually ignoring him, did not respond to him, casting at intervals probing glances over the gathering and including my brother in her surveillance. Chido tried to smile, but the smile was too narrow to dispel the apprehension in his eyes. He was incapable of any communication more meaningful than an occasional nod of his head. Every time that Chido smiled at him, Nhamo smiled at me, managing, as he intended, to irritate me intensely.

Yes, I was very irritable on that occasion, the occasion of my uncle's return, which should have been for me, as it was for everyone else, a sublime occasion. It was spoiled for me because I could not help thinking that had I been allowed, had I been able to welcome Babamukuru at the airport, I would have been there too, with Nhamo and my cousins, rejoicing, re-establishing the relationship that had been cut off when my cousins went away. Not going to the airport, not being able to resume my relationships with my cousins, these events coalesced formlessly in my mind to an incipient understanding of the burdens my mother had talked of. Whereas before I had believed with childish confidence that burdens were only burdens in so far as you chose to bear them, now I began to see that the disappointing events surrounding Babamukuru's return were serious consequences of the same general laws that had almost brought my education to an abrupt, predictable end. It was frightening. I did not want my life to be predicted by such improper relations. I decided I would just have to make up my mind not to let it happen. Curling my lip at Nhamo and my cousins, I departed, flouncing surlily, pointedly, out of the house to the kitchen; there, thrusting a log into the hearth so viciously that the three-legged pot

that on normal days contained *sadza*, but today was full of meat, splashed half its juices into the embers.

A piece of meat fell out too. I picked it out of the ashes and ate it, and then felt sick because I was still thinking about Nhamo and the cousins, and being cross with Nhamo for excluding me from their circle in spite of the fact that I did not approve of any of them. I considered the situation. Had I approved of my cousins before they went to England? Most definitely I had; I had loved them. When they visited the homestead we had played long, exciting games. Why did I no longer like them? I could not be sure. Did I like anybody? What about Babamukuru? Had the change to do with me or had it to do with them? These were complex, dangerous thoughts that I was stirring up, not the kind that you can ponder safely but the kind that become autonomous and malignant if you let them. If I continued in this way, I would soon be itching to beat Nhamo up because his smirking had brought the matter to a head. But I could not have the satisfaction of indulging my frustration in this way. Nhamo and I had stopped beating each other up a long time ago, at the time that I went back to school, more because we had developed so differently that we no longer had enough common ground in which to fight, than out of mutual respect or affection. Besides, I was reluctantly aware that beating up Nhamo would not help; my discontent had to do with more than my brother's annoying manners. Sensing how unwise it was to think too deeply about these things in case I manoeuvred myself into a blind alley at the end of which I would have to confront unfrontable issues, I busied myself with housework.

The housework was agreeable when it did not have to be done. Today, because of Babamukuru's homecoming, there were so many young aunts and nieces and cousins present that I could cook or not cook as I chose. Consequently I took great pains with the stew, letting the meat fry gently in its own fat until it was deliciously brown, adding enough chopped tomato and onion to make a rich gravy. It smelt good. I was pleased with my efforts, but they had lasted less than half an hour. To kill more time I made sausages out

of the tripe and the small intestine of Babamukuru's goat. When I had finished I cooked the vegetables.

The women were pleased with me when they came to prepare supper. 'You are quite a little worker,' they said. 'All that is left is to prepare the *sadza*.' Their praise made me feel better. It made me feel good. My confidence returned; Nyasha would not, I was sure, be able to prepare such a fine stew, certainly not at an open hearth. This idea made me feel so superior, so wholesome and earthy, like home-baked cornbread instead of the insubstantial loaves you buy in the shops, that I helped to cook the *sadza* as well. We did this outside in large drums, using sticks as thick as my arm for stirring. Chatting to aunts and cousins as we waited for the *sadza* to thicken, pouring in more mealie-meal when it had, I stopped feeling excluded and, since I no longer had need of them, my feelings of superiority disappeared as well. Exclusion held dreadful horrors for me at that time because it suggested superfluity. Exclusion whispered that my existence was not necessary, making me no more than an unfortunate by-product of some inexorable natural process. Or else it mocked that the process had gone wrong and produced me instead of another Nhamo, another Chido, another Babamukuru-to-be. I often felt superfluous in those days, but there in the camaraderie of the cooking, it was comfortable to occupy the corner that that same natural process had carved out for me. It was comfortable to recognise myself as solid, utilitarian me.

We cooked two five-gallon drums of good, smooth *sadza* using finely pounded, well winnowed and sieved mutwiwa, but there was no rice, and this was serious. On occasions such as this there should have been rice. But since Babamukuru had not been there to provide it, there was none. Maiguru had had the foresight to bring a few packets with her, but a few packets were not enough to feed the multitudes, so my mother was cooking Maiguru's rice on Maiguru's Dover Stove behind the house to make sure that it was reserved for the right people. When it was done she came down to help us dish out — mounds of steaming *sadza* into one set of dishes, great hunks of meat wallowing in gravy in another, vegetables in a third. These

we carried to the house, where my mother had already set out the rice.

I had a special task. I had to carry the water-dish in which people would wash their hands. I did not like doing this because you had to be very sure of the relative status of everybody present or else it was easy to make mistakes, especially when there were so many people. Today it was doubly tricky because although Babamukuru was the guest of honour, there were male relatives present of higher status than he. Making a considered and perhaps biased decision, I knelt first in front of Babamukuru, which was a mistake because he wanted me to let his uncle Isaiah, our eldest surviving grandfather, wash first. I knelt and rose and knelt and rose in front of my male relatives in descending order of seniority, and lastly in front of my grandmothers and aunts, offering them the water-dish and towel. The situation deteriorated after my grandfathers and Babamukuru had washed because after that the hierarchy was not clear. This uncle was that uncle's tezvara by virtue of his marriage to that one's sister, but also his brother because their mothers were sisters, albeit not of the womb. When this happened each of the parties insisted that the other was the superior and therefore ought to wash first. It was very complicated and confusing. I made more mistakes, which made people laugh and ask why I did not know the ways in which we were all related. At one point, having knelt for several minutes in front of one disclaiming uncle, I grew tired and let some water slop out of the dish on to his feet (apologising profusely) to encourage him to wash without further discussion. Nyasha indicated her solidarity with the ghost of a smile and a twitch of her eye, which I thought was insulting and so ignored her. Eventually the last younger aunt washed her hands and I rose to depart, whereupon my father asked me why I had neglected to offer Chido the water, so I went down on my knees in front of him. Naturally Nhamo took advantage of the situation to wash his hands too. Then I had to let Nyasha wash as well. Feeling fractious and put upon because I thought all three of them should have been eating with us in the kitchen, I offered Nyasha the water. Babamukuru said grace. The

meal began with much clapping of hands, praising of the gods for their providence and of us for our hard work.

In the kitchen we dished out what was left in the pots for ourselves and the children. My aunt Mavis, Shupikai's mother, in her joy over Babamukuru's return, had been unrestrained in dishing out the meat for the house so that there was not enough left in the pot to make a meal for those of us who were not dining there. As a result the youngest of us had only gravy and vegetables to go with our *sadza*. But the gravy was good and there was plenty of it. We, who rarely tasted meat, found no reason to complain.

By the time the eating was over and we went to the house to collect the plates, the elders were in an absolute delirium of happiness. It was truly remarkable to see them so transported without so much as a pot of *maseke* between them to encourage them to forget themselves. My father took great pleasure in his *maseke*, as did the majority of my male relatives, and my grandmothers and older aunts as well, but Babamukuru was strictly abstinent, so uncompromisingly temperate that he could detect alcohol on your breath at five yards in a strong wind. Beer was therefore taboo at this gathering, and the company was having to make do with *mahewu*, left to stand as long as possible without actually letting the mash ferment. Naturally there were mutterings of discontent, particularly from young uncles who were not closely related to Babamukuru and so did not adequately appreciate his authority. In spite of the absence of anything more lively than *mahewu* no gaiety had been lost from the gathering. Tete Gladys, arms swinging, dress swishing, was on her feet, swirling dizzily left and right to the tempo of 'Amazing Grace', executing an exuberant low bow at the end of each bar: 'Da-a-i (bow) ndi-i-ne (bow) ma-pa-aa-piro (bow), Nda-a-i (bow) bhu-u-ru (bow) ru-ka (bow).!' Meanwhile aunts and uncles and cousins uproariously improvised what they would do on account of Babamukuru's return had they only the wherewithal.

In the yard, unmarried uncles, cousins and aunts began on the drums and *hosho* in a circle, dancing and singing while individuals freestyled in the centre. It was almost like a wedding with music

and movement pulsing through the night to make your skin crawl and tingle, your armpits prickle, your body impatient to be up and concerned with the beat. My early childhood had been a prime time for dancing. Then I had used to amuse everybody by dropping my scholarly seriousness to twist and turn, and clap almost in time to the music. As I had grown older and the music had begun to speak to me more clearly, my movements had grown stronger, more rhythmical and luxuriant; but people had not found it amusing anymore, so that in the end I realised that there were bad implications in the way I enjoyed the rhythm. My dancing compressed itself into rigid, tentative gestures. I did not stop completely, but gatherings were much less fun after that and made me feel terribly self-conscious.

‘We are dancing,’ I invited Nyasha, who took a long time to understand.

‘They don’t understand Shona very well anymore,’ her mother explained. ‘They have been speaking nothing but English for so long that most of their Shona has gone.’

What Maiguru said was bewildering, bewildering and offending. I had not expected my cousins to have changed, certainly not so radically, simply because they had been away for a while. Besides, Shona was our language. What did people mean when they forgot it? Standing there, trying to digest these thoughts, I remembered speaking to my cousins freely and fluently before they went away, eating wild fruits with them, making clay pots and swimming in Nyamarira. Now they had turned into strangers. I stopped being offended and was sad instead.

‘Ask them, Maiguru,’ I urged. ‘Even if they don’t understand, they wouldn’t refuse, would they? Things like that,’ I continued vaguely but earnestly, ‘would bring their speech back more quickly.’ The singers were becoming inspired, the drums more and more animated. I could see Nyasha listening, tapping her fingers on her crossed knees in time to the drums. She talked to her mother eagerly in an English whose accent was so strange I could not understand a word of it, co-opting Chido into the discussion and talking in very definite tones. I was sure that my cousins wanted to join the merry-

making but Maiguru was not encouraging. I could tell from her voice, which was flat and passive, and from the odd word that I picked up like 'dirty' and 'sleep'. It was odd that Maiguru preferred her children not to dance. If they could not enjoy themselves with us, there was no reason for them to have come home. I think Nyasha was saying similar things to Maiguru because in the end her irritation became so open that my aunts stopped their lively conversations to find out what was going on.

'Now, what is the problem, Maiguru?' asked Tete Gladys. 'You are not forbidding your children to join the others, are you?'

'Why should I do that, Tete?' Maiguru replied evenly. 'I am only saying they should rest. You know, a flight is very tiring. But if you say they should dance, they shall. Tete has told you to go to the dance,' she informed her children in her uninflected voice.

Chido declined politely ('It's all right, Mum, I'm a bit tired anyway.'). Nyasha clicked her tongue scornfully and switched herself off. It was very abrupt the way she did it. One minute she was taking in everything that was happening, the next she would not have heard you even if you had spoken to her. I went outside, trying very hard not to let the episode spoil the rest of the evening. It was difficult though. I had been looking forward to having my cousins back so that things would be fun and friendly and warm as they had been in the old days, but it was not happening that way. So deep was my disappointment that I was not comforted when Nhamo, seduced by our unrestrained voices and the throb of the drum, came out to join us. I thought he was fickle, that he wanted to eat his chicken and have eggs as well.

Babamukuru stayed with us for only one night at that time, the time of his return, because he was to assume his old duties as headmaster and new duties as Academic Director of the Church's Manicaland Region immediately. There was not much time to discuss all the things that had needed to be discussed but had had to wait while he was away, so Babamukuru and his brothers and sister talked together far into the night and the early hours of morning. Babamukuru was concerned about the way in which the family was developing, pointing out that as an individual he had done what he

could for the family's status by obtaining a Master's Degree; that he hoped his children would do as much again, if not more; that he was pleased that he was in a position to provide his children with a fine start in that direction. His branch of the family was able to hold its head high in whatever company it found itself, but, he accurately indicated, the same could not be said for all the other branches. He had come to the conclusion on the basis of the news he had received from Jeremiah and others while he was in England, that the future did not look comfortable for the family as a whole. Now that he had returned, he said, it was time for the members to put their heads together to think of means of ensuring the prosperity of each branch of the family.

When Babamukuru speechified, which as head of the family he had to do often, he had a way of doing it that was calm and mild and so sensible that while you listened you couldn't help being overwhelmed by the good sense of his words and resolving to do exactly as he suggested, whatever that happened to be. Babamukuru was inspiring. He inspired confidence and obedience. He carried with him an aura from which emanated wisdom and foresight. There was sighing in acknowledgment of the family's difficulties, murmurs of agreement with Babamukuru's analysis.

'Er — what I see,' said Babamukuru, clearing his throat and removing pieces of meat that had stuck between his teeth with the slim blade of his multiple-blade penknife, 'is that what needs to be done is this.' He leant back in his chair at the head of the dining-table. 'We need to ensure that at least one member from each family is educated, at least to Form Four standard, because after that he will be in a position to take a course. Although this is not to say, of course, that, if it is possible, it would not be a good thing for this member to continue up to Form Six and even to university level after that.'

'It would be good,' agreed Tete Gladys. 'A graduate in each family! We would be proud.'

'Not just one!' expanded my father. 'Why shouldn't they all graduate? Why not?'

‘Jeremiah,’ reprimanded Babamukuru, ‘that is not a useful contribution. We must look for useful solutions. We cannot afford to dream.’

‘Quite right, *Mukoma*, quite right,’ agreed my father affably. ‘Who can afford to dream these days? Aiwa! You can’t dream! You can’t dream!’

‘Looking at the family as it stands today,’ continued Babamukuru, ‘I see that the main problem is with Jeremiah. Tete here is all right — her husband is able to take care of her and her children. Thomas is also in no trouble — he may not have a degree, but his teacher training is a solid qualification. The family does not go hungry. They live in a comfortable home. They wear decent clothes. When the children are of school-going age they will be able to go to school. These children who can go to school today are the ones whose families will prosper tomorrow. So Tete’s branch and Thomas’ branch are provided for. The real worry is your branch, Jeremiah.’ Tete pursed her lips and nodded in regretful agreement. Babamunini Thomas, modestly lowering his head, said nothing out of deference to his unfortunate elder brother.

‘I remember,’ Babamukuru went on, ‘that the year after my family and I arrived in England, you wrote to us, Jeremiah — no, it must have been the second year after we arrived. Yes, the second after we arrived, because we went there in 1960 and you wrote this particular letter, the one I am talking about, in 1962. It was dated 16 November 1962. I remember it very well, because when I was tired and discouraged and feeling so low I used to read that letter. I read that letter very many times. That letter made me see that even more than myself my whole family needed my qualification. That is how I was able to carry on even when things were very bad. That letter made me say to myself, “Come what may, I will succeed.” Yes, Jeremiah, I remember we received news from you saying that there was no money for school fees. We sent you what we could. We knew it was not much, but we were very pleased to hear that you were able to send both children back to school as a result of receiving that money we had sent.’

‘Things were tough, *Mukoma*, things were tough,’ acknowledged my father, grimacing strenuously to show just how tough. ‘Would we have survived if it hadn’t been for you? Aiwa, we would not. Never!’

‘It is true, *Mukoma*,’ endorsed Tete. ‘Our Jeremiah could have died. He and his whole family. Matters were that bad. Truly, *muera bonga*, you did a great deed.’

‘A great deed, a very great deed,’ murmured Babamunini Thomas.

‘My wife and I were very surprised,’ said Babamukuru, ‘that the crops had failed, because other people were telling us that there had been good harvests. Anyway, that is another matter. When we heard that both Nhamo and heyo — er, this girl — er, Tambudzai had returned to school, we were very pleased that you had used the money sensibly, Jeremiah.’ Babamukuru put his penknife away and sat tall in his chair. His presence became grave and weighty. As though giving way beneath its weight, my father, Babamunini Thomas and Tete inclined themselves attentively towards their brother.

‘What I have been thinking,’ Babamukuru began again after a lengthy pause, which made it evident that indeed he had been thinking deeply and effectively about the matter in hand, ‘what I have been thinking is this: providing money for school fees is good but it is not all that must be done to ensure a child’s success in school. A child must also be provided with the correct atmosphere which will encourage his mind to develop even when he is not in the classroom.’

‘True, *Mukoma*, you speak the truth,’ sighed my father, having gauged and approved the direction of Babamukuru’s speech. ‘Look at our Nhamo. I have never seen a child who loves his books the way he does, that Nhamo of ours. But how can he study when there is no electricity? How can he read when there are no books? Even going to school, how can he do that every day when there is so much work to be done on the homestead? I feel sorry for the boy but he — does he say anything? No. He just keeps quiet and works hard here and at school. I was blessed when I was given that son.’

Truly, I was blessed.’ He shook his head in sorrow and sympathy for his son’s suffering.

‘You are right, Jeremiah. I have observed that Nhamo is a promising scholar,’ agreed Babamukuru. ‘What we must do is to let Nhamo stay with us at the mission, let him go to school there. He must come at once, because the sooner he is given the best, the sooner will the best be returned. He is finishing Standard Three so there will be no problem with the transfer. I will come to fetch him a few days before the new school year begins. Meanwhile I will have him registered for Standard Four at the mission.’

My aunt was on her feet before Babamukuru had finished speaking. ‘Purururu!’ she shrilled as his last word dropped benevolently into the room. ‘Thank you, *muera bonga. Muera bonga*, we thank you. Would we, could we survive without you! Truly, we could not! Jeremiah,’ she commanded, turning to my father, ‘tell me plainly, you. Would you survive without your brother? For one day, just one day, could you do it? Kneel down! Kneel down properly. Thank God for giving you a saint for a brother. Thank your ancestors, Jeremiah, thank them well for giving you a brother who looks after you.’ She sank to the floor in front of Babamukuru, clapping her hands. Bo-bo-bo-bo-bo. ‘A great deed has been done, *muera bonga.*’ Bo-bo-bo. ‘Truly, you have done a great deed.’ My father and Uncle Thomas magnified Tete’s praise with their own eulogies, my father going down on one knee to do homage. Babamukuru belched magnanimously.

‘Do not thank me, do not thank me!’ he disclaimed modestly. ‘There is nothing surprising here. When there is a duty to do, it has to be done, that is all.’

My father informed Nhamo of these developments the next day, after Babamukuru had gone. They remained cloistered together in my parents’ room in the house for an hour, and this was only possible because most of the guests, living nearby and so being able to pop in at any time, had departed. Tete Gladys and Babamunini

Thomas stayed with us for a week because they lived far away, in Mtoko and Selukwe, and so did not visit often.

Nhamo was exultant, so puffed up with his own importance that it was uncomfortable and necessary for him to let off steam without delay. Unable to wait until I came home to begin bragging, he came to the vegetable garden, where he sat on a log and congratulated himself while I diverted one of Nyamarira's smaller tributaries into the beds of onions and rape. It was a bounteous story, the way he told it, holding much more promise than Babamukuru had in fact indicated.

'You know,' drawled my brother, twiddling a stalk of grass in the gap between his front teeth, 'Babamukuru wants a clever person, somebody who deserves the chance. That's why he wants me. He knows I've been doing very well at school. Who else is there for him to take?'

Nhamo, Nhamo, sneaky Nhamo! He did not speak more plainly than this because to have done so would have been blatantly nasty. Nhamo was seldom obviously offensive in case you confronted him with it and took him to task. His sins were mainly sins of omission. But on the occasions that he did do something actively nasty, he was satanically good at insinuating himself so sneakily into your most sensitive spots that if you did not know him well you could end up thinking you were being unfair to him when he annoyed you.

'Babamukuru says I am so bright I must be taken away to a good school and be given a good chance in life. So I shall go and live with Babamukuru at the mission. I shall no longer be Jeremiah's son,' he shouted, speaking my father's name in such derogatory tones that for once I was up in arms on my father's behalf. 'I shall wear shoes and socks, and shorts with no holes in them, all brand new, bought for me by Babamukuru. He has the money. I will even have underwear — a vest and pants. I shall have a jersey in winter, and probably a blazer too. I shall stop using my hands to eat. I will use a knife and fork.'

I think a little jealousy was permissible, even healthy under the circumstances. Unfortunately, since I had stopped reacting to

Nhamo a long time ago, so that all the annoying things he did had been building up for a long time, and since this time the irritation was too persistent to ignore, I was more than a little, less than healthily jealous. This was untactical of me because Nhamo carried on in the way that he did, describing himself in unqualified superlatives and suggesting that his good fortune was unquestionably deserved, a natural consequence of the fact that he was Nhamo, only in order to bait me. And eventually, my composure of the past few years, dating from the time we had fought on the football pitch at Sunday School, disintegrated into so many fine particles. I rose magnificently to the bait.

‘Ha! You are so stupid,’ I jeered. ‘If you are going to the mission to use a knife and fork, you will be disappointed. Didn’t you see Babamukuru eat with his hands? All of them — Maiguru and those proud children. They all ate with their hands.’

‘Did you want them to embarrass us?’ he retorted. ‘If they had wanted knives and forks, where would we have taken them from? But in their own home they use them. Each one has his own plate with his own portion of food and his knife and fork. I saw it. That’s what happened when we went to eat in Salisbury at Maiguru’s brother’s house, the one who is a medical doctor. I asked Chido if they eat like that at home and he said yes.’

I could not argue with such concrete evidence so I attacked from another position. ‘You will still be our father’s son. You will still be my brother. And Netsai’s. Even if you don’t like it. So you had better stop being proud for nothing and be grateful to Babamukuru for helping you.’

‘And you had better stop being jealous. Why are you jealous anyway?’ he retaliated, free to use all his ammunition now because I had begun the engagement. ‘Did you ever hear of a girl being taken away to school? You are lucky you even managed to go back to Rutivi. With me it’s different. I was meant to be educated.’

‘I’m glad you are going,’ I said. ‘Your voice makes noise. It hurts my ears.’

‘And you have eyes like a chameleon! I can see you are getting angry. You are going dark like one. Be careful, otherwise you will

stay that way and people will run away from you in case you bite them. Be careful, be careful! In case you bite!’

I picked up a rock and flung it at him. Nhamo sat unperturbed, following the missile’s trajectory with exaggerated movements of his head. It landed harmlessly in the grass. He laughed. I dived for him, but he was up and running lightly towards the cattle kraal, laughing and chanting ‘Du-du-muduri, kache! Rwavi muduri kache! Tambu muduri, kache! Pound well while I am eating potatoes at the mission!’

I considered running after him to give him the thrashing he deserved, but judging his head-start, saw that I would not catch him. Besides, we were so evenly matched these days that he might have won a fight or I might have, but I had not fought for a long time and I was out of practice. Today it was better not to fight than not to win. I let him go, still very cross with him for saying such silly things.

I was quite sure at the time that Nhamo knew as well as I did that the things he had said were not reasonable, but in the years that have passed since then I have met so many men who consider themselves responsible adults and therefore ought to know better, who still subscribe to the fundamental principles of my brother’s budding elitism, that to be fair to him I must conclude that he was sincere in his bigotry. But in those days I took a rosy view of male nature. After an episode like that, a grotesque and sad picture of my father and Nhamo in relation to Babamukuru and my cousin would come to my mind. I wanted my father and Nhamo to stand up straight like Babamukuru, but they always looked as though they were cringing. That picture was frightening. I used to suppose that they saw it too and that it troubled them so much that they had to bully whoever they could to stay in the picture at all. For from my grandmother’s history lessons, I knew that my father and brother suffered painfully under the evil wizards’ spell. Babamukuru, I knew, was different. He hadn’t cringed under the weight of his poverty. Boldly, Babamukuru had defied it. Through hard work and determination he had broken the evil wizards’ spell. Babamukuru was now a person to be reckoned with in his own right. He didn’t

need to bully anybody any more. Especially not Maiguru, who was so fragile and small she looked as though a breath of wind would carry her away. Nor could I see him bullying Nyasha. My cousin was pretty and bold and sharp. You never thought about Babamukuru as being handsome or ugly, but he was completely dignified. He didn't need to be bold any more because he had made himself plenty of power. Plenty of power. Plenty of money. A lot of education. Plenty of everything.

When you have a lot of anything it makes you feel good to give a bit of it away. I knew that because when I had a tickey from Babamukuru I could buy six fet koeks at break. I felt like a saint when I gave my friend Nyari two. That was why Babamukuru was always so kind and generous. That was why he bought his wife and his daughter pretty clothes and always made sure that there was money for Nyasha's education. That was why he did all he could for everybody and in this case had singled out Nhamo for special promotion, as he had been singled out by the good wizards at the mission. I understood that Nhamo was older than I and much more advanced academically. I understood that that made him the logical choice for Babamukuru's project. If he had not insisted that there were other criteria that disqualified me at the outset, I might have been happy for him. But he did insist, and I was very angry indeed.

It cost me a lot of energy to bury that incident with Nhamo so deeply that it would not interfere with the business of living. As it turned out, I was not altogether successful, because I could no longer bring myself to speak to my brother. Not that I consciously decided to ignore him. It just happened. Try as I would, I simply could not open my mouth to talk to him. My mother, who was in the first part of the pregnancy that resulted in Rambanai, was very distressed by all this.

'Now what evil spirits have arisen between you two?' she scolded. 'If you have been bewitched, then tell us so that something can be done. But if it is your own madness, stop it straight away!' She was anxious, my poor mother, because four babies, three of them sons, had died in infancy between my birth and this pregnancy. There was talk that somebody had tied her and she was afraid that it

might get so bad she would begin to miscarry, or not conceive at all. The rumours were vicious. One or two particularly bad people who knew a little about my mother's family predicted that my mother's younger sister, Lucia, was the culprit because Lucia was passing her prime but was still unmarried and it would be useful for her to be called in to be a second child-bearer for my father. Seeing how badly my mother was taking our quarrel, I nearly called a truce with Nhamo, but when he told me that I would be better off with less thinking and more respect, I was glad I had stood my ground. Towards the end my anger disappeared and I would have talked to him if it had not meant losing face. So when Babamukuru came to fetch Nhamo, I was very relieved, first because he had gone, secondly because I would be free to talk to whomever I wished.

Another advantage of my brother's absence was that he was not there to interfere with my attempts to be friends with Nyasha. Babamukuru came to visit us often, at least every other weekend, and sometimes two weekends in a row and during the week as well. Maiguru usually accompanied him. Sometimes Nyasha came too. On very rare occasions everyone came, including Nhamo and Chido. I did my best to talk to Nyasha when she came. I racked my brains for odd English words that I could slip into my sentences to help her understand what I was saying, but it was no use. She did not talk beyond a quick stuttered greeting. Nor did she smile any more at all. Most of the time, much to Babamukuru's irritation, she stayed close to Maiguru, refusing my invitations to play *pada* or pound maize or take a trip to Nyamarira. When she did venture away from her mother, our games were strained and silent. In the end I felt stupid and humiliated for making such a fuss over my cousin, but it was difficult to leave her alone. I missed the bold, ebullient companion I had had who had gone to England but not returned from there. Yet each time she came I could see that she had grown a little duller and dimmer, the expression in her eyes a little more complex, as though she were directing more and more of her energy inwards to commune with herself about issues that she alone had seen.

One day she behaved very badly indeed. They arrived at eleven o'clock in the morning, in a season when there was very little in the

garden in the way of vegetables. However, there was a cow in milk, so my mother was relieved when Nyasha, having been asked whether she would have milk or vegetables, said she would have milk. Unfortunately, when lunchtime came, Nyasha tucked into the vegetables with the rest of us. When my mother offered her the sour milk she had asked for, she became very morose. She refused to eat anything, although by this time everybody was very concerned and sympathetic and saying she could have whatever she wanted. My parents thought she was a miserable child. They made no secret of saying so when Babamukuru and Maiguru had returned to the mission. Every time my relatives came from the mission I stayed near Nyasha, and watched her. In this way I saw her observing us all. She said little, but sometimes her lips would move to rehearse the words when someone used complicated language. She was silent and watchful, observing us all with that complex expression of hers — what we said, what we did, how we said it, how we did it — with an intensity that made me uncomfortable.

Then when Nhamo came home at the end of his first year with Babamukuru, you could see he too was no longer the same person. The change in his appearance was dramatic. He had added several inches to his height and many to his width, so that he was not little and scrawny any more but fit and muscular. Vitamins had nourished his skin to a shiny smoothness, several tones lighter in complexion than it used to be. His hair was no longer arranged in rows of dusty, wild cucumber tufts but was black, shiny with oil and smoothly combed. All this was good, but there was one terrible change. He had forgotten how to speak Shona. A few words escaped haltingly, ungrammatically and strangely accented when he spoke to my mother, but he did not speak to her very often any more. He talked most fluently with my father. They had long conversations in English, which Nhamo broke into small, irregular syllables and which my father chopped into smaller and even rougher phonemes. Father was pleased with Nhamo's command of the English language. He said it was the first step in the family's emancipation since we

could all improve our language by practising on Nhamo. But he was the only one who was impressed by this inexplicable state my brother had developed. The rest of us spoke to Nhamo in Shona, to which, when he did answer, he answered in English, making a point of speaking slowly, deliberately, enunciating each syllable clearly so that we could understand. This restricted our communication to mundane insignificant matters.

But the situation was not entirely hopeless. When a significant issue did arise so that it was necessary to discuss matters in depth, Nhamo's Shona — grammar, vocabulary, accent and all — would miraculously return for the duration of the discussion, only to disappear again mysteriously once the issue was settled. The more time Nhamo spent at Babamukuru's, the more aphasic he became and the more my father was convinced that he was being educated. My mother was alarmed. She knew that the mission was a Christian place. Nevertheless she maintained that the people there were ordinary people. She thought someone on the mission was bewitching her son and was all for making an appointment with the medium. My father reassured her: 'How will the boy remember his English without speaking it? Doesn't he speak with us when he wants? He is dedicated to his studies. Like *Mukoma*. Dedicated. That's all.' Mother did not say anything against Nhamo's language after that, but she was still unhappy. She did want him to be educated, she confided to me, but even more, she wanted to talk to him.

This Nhamo I have described is the Nhamo we were expecting home that November afternoon in 1968. These things I have recounted are the reasons why I was not disappointed when he did not arrive. Mother, as usual, was upset. 'That son of mine!' she sighed. 'If he could avoid it, he would never come home.' Spitefully, I agreed.

We had finished eating and were agreeing that it was too late for Babamukuru to bring Nhamo home when a car rumbled into the yard, its headlights lighting up our smoky kitchen through the door left open for fresh air and coolness. Netsai, who is very loving, was

ecstatic. '*Mukoma* Nhamo has come, *Mukoma* Nhamo has come,' she sang, skipping out into the yard. My father, smiling, puffing up a little, followed. We were all in the yard by the time Babamukuru climbed out of his car. He looked haggard and tired and old. Maiguru, just as distraught, alighted on the other side. For a moment no word was spoken, Babamukuru not even noticing Netsai, who embraced him asking, '*Mukoma* Nhamo, Babamukuru, where is *Mukoma* Nhamo?'

Without warning my mother keened shrilly through the dark silence. 'Go back!' she wailed. 'Go back! Why do you come all this way to tell me what I already know!' She collapsed on to the car bonnet, slipped to the ground, picked herself up and collapsed again. Maiguru came to my mother to hold her, but my mother pushed her violently away. 'You want to hold me, you,' she hissed. 'Now, when it is too late, that is when you are concerned. You pretend. You are a pretender, you. First you took his tongue so that he could not speak to me and now you have taken everything, taken everything for good. Why are you keeping quiet! Why are you not speaking? Because it is true. You bewitched him and now he is dead. Pthu!' She spat at Maiguru's feet. 'And you too, Babamukuru! Pthu! I spit at you! You and your education have killed my son.' This time when she fell to the ground she did not pick herself up, but rolled there, tearing her hair and her clothes and grinding sand between her teeth. Netsai began to cry.

'Hold her, Jeremiah,' said Babamukuru in a heavy, empty voice. 'It is true. We do not bring good news.'

Maiguru, keening softly, helped my father to coax my mother, now quiet and limp and bewildered, to the kitchen.

Keening. I remember keening that seemed to go on all through the night: shrill, sharp, shiny, needles of sound piercing cleanly and deeply to let the anguish in, not out.

In the kitchen Babamukuru spoke. 'There is nothing to be done but to tell you what has happened. The boy complained of a pain in his neck, a slight pain, a few days ago.'

'He first told me he was not well on Tuesday,' said Maiguru.

‘Yes, it was on Tuesday,’ continued Babamukuru. ‘On Wednesday he was not feeling better, so we took him to our clinic there at the mission. The doctor thought the boy might have been suffering from mumps. Now, we did not know whether the departed had suffered from mumps or not, so we could not give the doctor useful information on that point. Anyway, the doctor was not sure, but he said if it was mumps, it could get worse, so he decided to keep the boy under observation. That was on Wednesday night. On Thursday morning we went to see him. He did not look bad. In fact he looked much brighter. He even said he wanted to come out of the hospital, but the doctor was not satisfied with his progress. He wanted to keep him for at least another day. I left a telephone message at the Council Offices for you, Jeremiah, saying Nhamo had been admitted to the clinic and that I would pick you up to take you there this evening. Weren’t you at the shops today? Didn’t you receive that message?’

My father’s shoulders were shaking. He could not speak.

‘Anyway,’ Babamukuru resumed, ‘he did not look bad at that time. I went to a meeting in town. While I was there, my wife received a telephone call from the clinic saying that the boy had grown worse and they were moving him to the hospital in town, the General Hospital. My wife hurried to the clinic. She wanted to accompany him in the ambulance, but when she got there he was already fading. He passed away before they could put him into the ambulance. This was the news I received when I arrived home at some time past eight. I came straight away.’

Babamukuru grasped my father’s hands in both of his. ‘My heart cries with yours, but we cannot understand the plans of the heavens,’ he said, moving on to hold my mother’s hands, ‘but there is One who knows. He will keep you and comfort you even when evil strikes against you.’

‘Ho-o-re!’ groaned my father. ‘You speak the truth, *Mukoma*, but today we are overwhelmed by jealous spirits. The boy was bright, doing well. Why should he go unless something was sent to take him? Ha! I did not think such things would happen!’ He put his face in his hands. ‘What else can I say, *Mukoma*? It is difficult to know

what to say at these times. But I know you looked after the boy as if he were yours. Those in the heavens know why he was taken. We can only accept that it has happened.’ He stood up. ‘I will go down the road to Samhingu’s homestead. They will carry the news to the others.’ Tears wet his face. He did not wipe them away.

Seeing my father cry, seeing my mother moan and rock in Maiguru’s arms, hearing Netsai cry in fear as well as in grief, and Rambanai, wailing, whimper and whine, a little of my armour cracked. I was sad for them rather than anguished over any loss of mine, because my brother had become a stranger to me. I was not sorry that he had died, but I was sorry for him because, according to his standards, his life had been thoroughly worth living.

‘There is nothing to be done,’ my aunt was saying to my mother, ‘except to bear the pain until it passes. You must endure the pain of his passing as you endured the pain of his coming.’

‘I cannot endure it,’ my mother moaned. ‘Maiguru, hold me. I too am going to die.’

The body was fetched the next day from the mission and buried in the family burial ground beside my grandmother and other ancestors. After a decent length of time had passed, Babamukuru again raised the question of the emancipation of my father’s branch of the family. ‘It is unfortunate,’ he said, ‘that there is no male child to take this duty, to take this job of raising the family from hunger and need, Jeremiah.’

‘It is as you say,’ my father agreed. ‘Tambudzai’s sharpness with her books is no use because in the end it will benefit strangers.’

‘You are correct, Jeremiah,’ observed my uncle, ‘but I will not feel that I have done my duty if I neglect the family for that reason. Er — this girl — heyo, Tambudzai — must be given the opportunity to do what she can for the family before she goes into her husband’s home.’

‘Exactly!’ agreed my father. ‘She must be given the opportunity.’

My mother was grief stricken when my father told her what he and Babamukuru had decided.

‘You, Jeremiah,’ she said, and she called him Jeremiah infrequently. ‘You, Jeremiah, are you mad? Have you eaten some

wild shrub that has gone to your head? I think so, otherwise how could you stand there and tell me to send my child to a place of death, the place where my first living child died! Today you are raving! She will not go. Unless you want me to die too. The anxiety will kill me. I will not let her go.'

'But what will she do?' persuaded my father. 'She has finished her Standard Three. Tell me, is there a Standard Four at Rutivi? Kuedza is too far to walk. Where will she do her Standard Four?'

'Don't try to make a fool out of me,' my mother retorted. 'Do you think I haven't heard that they are starting the Standard Four at that school? Enrol her at Rutivi, Jeremiah, because I am telling you, I will not let her go.'

My father did not pursue the matter, but I went to the mission all the same. My mother's anxiety was real. In the week before I left she ate hardly anything, not for lack of trying, and when she was able to swallow something it lay heavy in her stomach. By the time I left she was so haggard and gaunt she could hardly walk to the fields, let alone work in them.

'Is Mother ill?' whispered Netsai, frightened. 'Is she going to die too?'

Netsai was frightened. I, I was triumphant. Babamukuru had approved of my direction. I was vindicated!

How can I describe the sensations that swamped me when Babamukuru started his car, with me in the front seat beside him, on the day I left my home? It was relief, but more than that. It was more than excitement and anticipation. What I experienced that day was a short cut, a rerouting of everything I had ever defined as me into fast lanes that would speedily lead me to my destination. My horizons were saturated with me, my leaving, my going. There was no room for what I left behind. My father, as affably, shallowly agreeable as ever, was insignificant. My mother, my anxious mother, was no more than another piece of surplus scenery to be maintained, of course to be maintained, but all the same superfluous, an obstacle in the path of my departure. As for my sisters, well, they were there. They were watching me climb into Babamukuru's car to be whisked away to limitless horizons. It was up to them to learn the important lesson that circumstances were not immutable, no burden so binding that it could not be dropped. The honour for teaching them this emancipating lesson was mine. I claimed it all, for here I was, living proof of the moral. There was no doubt in my mind that this was the case.

When I stepped into Babamukuru's car I was a peasant. You could see that at a glance in my tight, faded frock that immodestly defined my budding breasts, and in my broad-toed feet that had grown thick-skinned through daily contact with the ground in all weathers. You could see it from the way the keratin had reacted by thickening and, having thickened, had hardened and cracked so that the dirt ground its way in but could not be washed out. It was evident from the corrugated black callouses on my knees, the scales on my skin that were due to lack of oil, the short, dull tufts of malnourished hair. This was the person I was leaving behind. At Babamukuru's I expected to find another self, a clean, well-groomed, genteel self