Excerpts from *Bilakhulu!*
by Vonani Bila

Images from childhood

i

the people of pfukani
whose huts were uprooted in 1968
grass-thatched roofs loaded in gg trucks
goats, dogs, bicycles and pots heaped onto the trucks
poor people trekking to the unknown barren land
leaving behind fruit trees and gardens
leaving behind graves of their beloved ones
trekking to gandlanani, squashed like sardines
vavanuna va xandile na maburuku (men's pants back to front)
vavasati va xandile na swikete (women's skirts back to front)
hi xibububu xo pfuxiwa hi huwa ya tilori (woken up hurriedly by the roaring trucks)
because it was time
to separate vhavenda from vatsonga
because it was time
to make way for the white man.

ii

shirley primary
the same school where eduardo mondlane taught
boys used to play, jumping over the dump
jumping over the blazing fire
but i can't forget that day
when oriel tried to jump over the fire
whether he tripped or was pushed into the burning flames i don't know
but his clothes caught fire
his hair caught fire
clothes and flesh became one
everyone thought it was the end of him.

iii

i remember
my mother making fire in the open ground
stirring the bubbling pot of pap amidst cracking thunder
pelting rain and flashing lightning
even in our windowless huts
we sailed, floating in water on the mats
when grass-thatched huts caved in to bucketing rains.

iv

winter days at lemana high
white teachers opened windows
for the chilly air to freeze our toes
the same teachers who were paid
a tolerance bonus to teach a black child.

v

the wooden electric pole behind our house
planted in the family cemetery
cables of fire trapping swallows and owls
turning mischievous monkeys green
cables of modern fire that galloped kilometres from town
to supply a certain dombani, victor, magantawa
and bernard with warmth
bypassing our darknesss and the smog.

vi

the graves under water
the colossal deep dam of death
that the big man dombani built
where we swam naked in summer
our rags drying in thorn trees
i remember
dombani the hefty burly-surly man
clad in khaki wear and veldskoene
the man with a bloodthirsty temper
wielding a rifle
on horseback
at sunset
cracking shots in the air
reptiles and porcupines retreating to holes
riding around the dam
watching for the black boy
to raise his head above water
to fire with delight
to crack the boy's skull
to halt his breath
or to just see the little boy consumed by water
to teach him a lesson
that under the orbiting sun
the dam is not for naked black boys
it's not for a speck of village dust
but it's for sailing white men in boats
who catch fish
even when drunk.

from **Ancestral Wealth**

For my father Risimati Daniel Bila: 1931-1989

I

Under these tall thorn umbrella trees
My ancestors dwell
Jonas is buried in a woven grass kenya
When Dayimani woke up dead at 10 am
He was buried in the afternoon, the same day
His body covered with white linen and a thin blanket
My ancestors dwell here
Seated, facing home in the east
Facing Bileni, far away in Mozambique
A broken mattress and xihlungwani *heaped on the grave*
Cracked enamel plates and mugs heaped on the grave

II

Papa, when you finally got admitted at Giyani Block
We thought the learned doctors who can see
What's hidden in blood and water
Would remove these needles
And pins and spears in your veins and wearied bones
But their bewitched green-red flashing machines in theatre
Confirmed you healthy
And when you got into the late night train to Garankuwa Hospital
Far away in Pretoria, on that ultra-distance bumpy ride
We thought the learned doctors
Would have removed this excruciating pain
In your chest and packing-up bones
But doctors in white gowns saw no fault in your stuttering engine
They sent you home
You got into that long bumpy train uncured
They asked you to come with your wife on 4th December 1989
For possible heart surgery
And the next day you came back home
Sat with your family around the fire
That night you didn't cough blood clots, nor groan
That night you didn't vomit
Nor was your body a river of sweat
Your face was sun-beaming
Blue eyes were shining
We ate chicken stew and pap
Drank Rooibos tea with buttered bread
That night owls and the wind didn't howl in trees
The mountain snake and dzelehani didn't cry
Dogs and cats didn't wail or mew
That night I slept like a baby

Under these tall thorn umbrella trees
My ancestors rise and hold hands
They sing in unison
Dance in rhythmic step
Around the fire

III

Wednesday 13 September 1989, 1 a.m.
You asked mother to extinguish the paraffin lamp
Burning on the red polished cement floor
The time to switch off your tormented heart beat had beckoned
That day you requested mhani N'wa-Noel
Your concubine from Mbhokota
To sleep in the grass-thatched rondavel with your girl children
Because the last night of intimacy
And pain belonged to your wife Fokisa N'wa-Mahatlani
Your black beauty of twenty six years
Yena wa ka mkhamu wa nsuku na ngwavila (She whose body glitters with gold and gems)
Mbati ya ku fuma (The door to wealth)
Your last night belonged to your wife
Who birthed you seven healthy children
Children born between 1964 and 1980
The last night to outline your will –
Because you knew *n'wana wa munhu u le kusuhani*
The last night to outline how your homestead should be run
So that you don't return home wearing shorts
And run riot
In case your house was turned into a playground
Emachihweni, emathumbhanini
You sat on your three quarter bed
Wearing that brown striped t-shirt from Pep stores
Eyes fixed on the old leaking zinc roof
Then you paged through the Old Mutual policy document
And you said:
Mhana Oom (he called me Oom)
Lwangu leri i ra khale (The roof is old)
Switina ndzi xavile (I have bought the bricks)
Kambe a swi nge eneli ku aka yindlu ya kahle (But they'll not be enough to build a decent house)
Loko va ku nyika swimalana swa mina swa phenxeni (When they give you my little pension fund)
Vumba yindlu (Build a house)
Kamara ya Oom, kamara ya Simon, kamara yin'wana ya Makhanani na Julia (A room for Oom, a room for Simon, another room for Makhanani and Julia)
Loko Xikwembu a xi lo ndzi nyika malembe ya nkombo yo hanya (If God had given me seven more years to live)
Oom na Simon a va ta va va ri ku tirheni (Oom and Simon would be working)
A va ta kota ku hlayisa Makhanani na Julia (They would take care of Makhanani and Julia)
Then the burning paraffin lamp was extinguished:
Each sleeping in their separate three quarter beds
Suddenly a heavy hand whipped mother's shoulder

It was her grandmother N'wa-Xakhombo
Whose voice shrieked:
Pfuka wena N'wa-Mafelalomo (Wake up, you who die in far distant places)
A wu swi voni leswaku wa weriwa? (Don't you see the roof is falling, collapsing upon you?)
All she heard was one groan
Hhmmm, hmmmm!
And papa, when she came to your three quarter bed
Daniel Risimati Bila the son of Dayimani and N'wa-Zulu
Had packed for good
Papa, your room was filled with cold air
Misty cloudy smog covered the room at 1 a.m.
Mama says you didn't hit or kick the walls violently
As you wrestled with the monster
Kwalaho ndzi n'wi longa (Then I laid out his body)
Ndzi koka minkumba ndzi zola milenge (I removed blankets and elevated his legs)
Ndzi lola mavoko ya longoloka na yena (I elevated his hands and arms along his body)
Ndzi vuyetela mahlo (I gently closed his eyes with a simple touch)
Ndzi n'wi sula xikandza (I wiped down his face)
A hlambile a nga se etlela (He had bathed before bedtime)
Mapfalo ya mina a ma fi le (I didn't feel any remorse)
Ivi ndzi khomelela mubedwa (Then I held the bed so firm)
Ndzi ku kumbe u ta pfuka (Thinking that he would wake up)
She searched for Rattex in the wardrobe
If she had found it
She would have crushed it
Swallowed it to burn her liver and heart
And join you in the other world
How would she raise her children
With cents from selling bananas and tomatoes
At the Elim market?

Under these tall thorn umbrella trees
My ancestors rise and hold hands
They sing in unison
Dance in rhythmic step
Around the fire

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VI

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Because Giyani Block breeds the pungent death smell
Shallow breathing skeletons crumble in the crowded ward
With no family member to preserve their sanity
The jaws lock, eyes fixed
And the white pupils enlarged in the light so bright

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Because shivering patients with bluish lips
Watch tearfully as the final air bursts from the belly
Of a patient next door, bursting like a detonated bomb
Misty air blackening the ward with coldness

The restless patients with irregular pulse
Watch helplessly as the nurses remove the linen
With that stinking last black stool
Transferring this man who died in the night to another ward –
Next to a living patient in a single room
The living patient is happy he's got a neighbour
But the neighbour is fast asleep, wearing a shroud
The new neighbour is neither hungry nor thirsty
The living starts to hallucinate
Gets lost in nappies
Now he knows the nurses brought him a strange ghost
Who'll gnaw at his dreams

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Because in this hospital, like many hospitals
Just an hour after someone has been confirmed dead by the doctor
The nurses make up the same bed
A new patient sleeps in there comfortably
He doesn't know someone has just died there
He collects the spirit of the dead
In the middle of the night
The new patient rushes to the toilet to pray
Pleading to see his only son from Joburg
And when his son arrives the next morning
And holds his father's cold hand
The old man opens his mouth with difficulty
As if to say, my son take care of my cattle
But no word shoots from the mouth layered with white foam
And again goes another patient
In broad daylight

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Because the groaning and wailing movie never stops in the hospital
Some pale-faced patients urinate in coffee mugs and plates
The very same mugs they use for coffee and tea
Some patients jump from the bed like impalas
Tearing drips and tubes away
They race around the ward wearing the catheters
Bubbling with urine tea
They too scream in hallucination:
Nurse, come and help
They are here with knives
They want to suffocate me
They want to cut my throat

In the intensive care unit, someone is motionless
Trapped in a truncation
His car rolled three times into the donga
His head was almost crushed
Perhaps he's brain dead
But the heart is still beating slowly
The nurses feed him
They change his nappies every hour
His family won't allow the medics to
Switch off the life support machine
Because though he's brain dead
Miracles can still happen
They happened in the days of Jesus Christ
And when his spear suddenly rises
The nurses know the brain dead patient's life ticket is still intact

Some burnt-out nurses simply talk on cellphones
Watching this ongoing groaning and vomiting and shitting drama
But you papa, you didn't want to die in hospital
like your mother Makhanani N'wa-Zulu
Who spent five months at Shangaan Block without eating
Nor going to the toilet on her own
My grandmother who died alone
Who when her coffin was opened for viewing
Even a brave man like you Papa, cried
Because there was no one to close her mouth

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Like Dayimani your father
And Jonas your grandfather
And Makhayingi your great grandfather
You came home to rest forever
After a family meal
In the hands of your wife
In your bed
In the morning so still

VII

If you were alive today, madala –
I'd buy you a suit and soft skin ostrich shoes
I'd fly you to Durban or Cape Town
So you can walk on the beach
Feel the soft grains of summer sand
I'd take you out to sit-down restaurants
Try out shrimps, mussels and this good food I eat

If you were alive today, madala –
We would plant avocado and litchi trees
Grow spinach and beetroot together

Pinch and prune sweetest tomatoes that yield
You would teach me how to dig a trench
How to prepare a seedbed for seedlings
How to make ridges and furrows
How to mulch and make compost and manure
How to save water and use grey water
We would grow those red roses
And maintain those white lilies
We would do gardening on our ancestral land
Singing your song:
7/8 u ya lithanda isaka la mazambani
U ya lithanda isaka la mazambani

If you were alive today, madala –
You would tell me how you survived the white dog
That followed you every morning to work
The dog that would run fast past you
The strange dog that would slide through your legs
Or even hit your legs with its tail
The dog that walked ahead of you
The dog that numbed your feet
The dog that shook and wearied your bones
The dog that disappeared at the bus stop
Just before the hospital gate
The same white *vaveni* that received you back from work
But couldn't enter the gate to your house
To throw you into a grave

If you were alive today, madala –
You would tell me about that rope
That roamed in your nightmares
The rope that made you so impatient
That made you hate everything about your wife
The rope that made you hit her
And want to kill her with a knife
The rope of which prophet Muvhangeli said:
U nga yi rhwaleli loko u yi vona endleleni ya wena (Don't pick it up when you find it placed on your path)
The tough rope of wicked relatives
Who had long sized your neck

If you were alive today, madala –
You would tell me how you and Ngholeni picked up that dead rabbit
Early in the morning on your way to work
How you skinned the rabbit with delight
How you wanted to cook it for lunch
When suddenly a strange man came
And touched your forehead
And said, "*and hi yena papantsongo wa Frank*."
Then your forehead ached and pounded
And when you came back home from work

The same strange man
Hobbled to your house
All he said was one sentence:
I needed to find Frank's brother's place
Then he vanished
Stealing your heart
Placing it in a cave
Planting a cockerel's heart in you
And you coughed and coughed

VIII

Papa, I know it took us twenty years to erect your tombstone
All along the wind was blowing you away
The sun was burning you
Your pillow was your hand
But now Bila, Mhlahlandlela, rest in peace
Do not open the grave and come home wearing shorts
Since you left, your wife has remained in the house
I've not seen a man sitting on your chair
It's still your house
Full of trees and vegetables

7/8 u ya lithanda isaka la mazambani
U ya lithanda isaka la mazambani

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