

“Autobiography of Sand: Relief Map of A Drifting Mind” – Gabeba Baderoon

Four Pages for Heated Conversations – Draft

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Africans are routinely associated with disease, but we are rarely invited to reflect on the subtleties of illness and healing. Reversing this, I am writing a fractured verse memoir about concussion.

During a flight from Cape Town to Pennsylvania, something falls from an overhead compartment onto my head. Afterward, nothing coheres, nothing eases the pain impaling my skull. Writing recedes ...

Years later, ketamine allays my headaches and brings a slow solace of muted hallucinations. As a side effect, I can write again.

Concussion haunts the resulting work. “Notes on Grief,” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *New Yorker* essay on the condition’s unmooring effects, shows that its telling requires a contingent form.

So I am piecing together memory, medical records, pain diaries and the creative journals I *could not write* into a verse memoir of concussion, an intimate account of hurt and repair.

Three years after my injury, I return to the sand-swept Cape Flats outside Cape Town, where I grew up. A hundred thousand years ago it was a seabed and for the past century it's been a place for throwaway people. In the colonial period, settlers' ox-wagons devastated its delicate desert ecology and turned it into what they called it already, a wasteland. Diaries from the time show that they hated its lashing wind and endless grey sand. During apartheid, the Flats was where the government threw Black people they'd forcibly removed from neighborhoods newly declared white. And once you're there, you're there forever – or, in my case, twenty-eight years of forever. After the “removals” – a mild word for that reverberating desecration of self, belonging and nearness to others – the Flats became a byword for pathology.

Sandgangsdrugsrapesandgangsdrugsrape, intone the newspapers. You dream of leaving. Or you stay and come to belong.

The usual register for speaking about the Flats is contempt, pathos or comedy. But, living there again, I find that *not leaving* teaches me a language for the *not me* of concussion. Also, a different vocabulary for the Flats. This matters, because despising the Flats helps to erase the memory of slavery in South Africa, a forgotten brutality that lasted from 1658 to 1834. Sexual violence was so widespread during slavery that the Cape Colony had one of the most racially heterogeneous populations on earth. After Emancipation in 1834, freed slaves at the Cape – whose origins lay in East Africa, South Asia and South East Asia – were called “Coloureds.” A century later, Apartheid used “Coloured” as a racial category meaning “neither native nor white,” turning South Africa's two-century foundation in slavery into a trifling preface. We descendents receded into background. Everyone knows about Apartheid's 46 years of

dehumanizing violence, but how is it possible that South Africa's 176 pitiless years of slavery are almost invisible?

The Flats is not a beautiful part of the city. By writing about it, I conjure the ghost of slavery. Its subtle landscape – 200 square miles of sand with no focal point, no variation – also translates me to myself. I come to see my jarred brain as a featureless, overlooked place I had left. So I return, make restitution and try to belong again.

I make a relief map of the Flats. In geography, relief is elevation, showing the rises and depressions of a territory as well its length and breadth. A map conveys this through shading: darker areas represent even planes and lighter ones show mountain ridges, for instance. A relief map of the Flats is a kind of irony, of course, since flatness has no relief. It simply produces unvarying darkness – all negative, all not. People on the Flats live in the negative. Removed to nowhere, we, like the Flats, became backdrop. Forgotten. Common as dirt.

I began “Autobiography of Sand” in December 2021 after ketamine treatment, gathering an archive of medical records, pain diaries, memoirs of illness, research on concussion, colonial diaries and scholarship on the Cape landscape. Formally mirroring its subject, the manuscript is structured not into chapters but fragments, hesitations and hauntings. Central to the latter are the creative journals I *could not write* and whose non-existence is the ghostly penumbra of the pain diaries I kept. For years, I dutifully logged the present continuous tense of pain: pounding, piercing, grinding, throbbing Almost discernable beneath this narrow lexicon are the unplanned jottings I usually scribble just after waking and from which poetry is born.

Over millenia the wind and sea have leveled the Flats – pummeling, tumbling, pounding, grinding. In its history, I find the same words for making sand in the lexicon for pain that makes me. Sand woman. Sand. The thing I had tried to escape.

Poetry for Beginners

In the evening poetry class for beginners
a girl in a thick brown coat she doesn't take off

breathes in deep
and risking something says fast

my boyfriend's in prison

I'm here to find out
how to write to him through the bars

and someone laughs

and she pulls herself back into her coat
and from inside looks past us

and the next week
doesn't come back

and I think of her for years
and what poetry is

I think this is my origin
where poetry is risk, is betrayal

and the memory of the first question
how not to be alone

I Cannot Myself

To come to this country,
my body must assemble itself

into photographs and signatures.
Among them they will search for me.

I must leave behind all uncertainties.
I cannot myself be a question.

I Forget to Look

The photograph of my mother at her desk in the fifties
has been in my purse for twenty years,
its paper faded, browning,
the scalloped edge bent then straightened.

The collar of her dress folds discreetly.
The angle of her neck looks as though
someone has called her from far away.

She was the first in her family to take
the bus from Claremont
up the hill to the university.

At one point during the lectures at medical school,
black students had to pack their notes, get up and walk
past the ascending rows of desks out of the theatre.

Behind the closed door, in an autopsy
black students were not meant to see,
the uncovering and cutting of white skin.

Under the knife, the skin,
the mystery of sameness.

In a world that defined how black and white
could look at each other, touch each other,
my mother looks back, her poise unmarred.

Every time I open my purse,

she is there, so familiar I forget
to look at her.

The History of Intimacy

I.

You remember it because it's a wound.

A cut, twenty cuts, the name
for the canings on the palm,
on the knuckles, on the buttocks,
a finely graded order of pain
that we who should not exist
were assigned for our failures.

II.

You keep you white, nuh,
Mike shouts in 1987 across the heads
of students sitting on Jameson Steps
and the sudden pale silence shows
we are no longer in uniform in the quad
at Livingstone High, teasing hey,
why did you look through me
as though I don't exist. And this slipping
from being we called keeping you white,
but saying it out loud reveals
how we have learned
to measure our existence.

III.

In the video store after I've ordered a film,
my cousin elbows me, Why you putting on?
Putting on. Transitive verb. Putting on what?
Putting on skin, putting on
not nothingness.

IV.

In 1988 at Crawford train station, my brother and I find
a blue plank hand-painted in yellow letters:

“Non-Whites Only” on one side

“Whites Only” on the other

thrown away by the fence next to the tracks.

Picking it up, we see the two sides

of the sign lay back to back,

each half resting against its opposite,

intimate and inverse

but unknown to each other.

We knew this was history

someone had made by hand then hidden

and tried to forget. We bring it home

and come across it sometimes in a corner

when we're looking for something else.

V.

When the Group Areas Act is abolished,

my mother aches to go back

to the street she was removed from

and it is we, grown attached

to the scar we call home, who say, No,

we don't want to live in a white area,

this time ceding it ourselves.

VI.

Mother, how do I write about you?

On night duty at medical school, you learned
to sleep so lightly you could wake
in an instant in an emergency,
and for the rest of your life
your body became a body that never again
could sleep through the night.

You told of one evening when, for some reason
a little irked with my father, you left
the table early, returning
to the bedroom by yourself, and found
my sister blue for lack of breath.

To this day, you recall what anger gave you,
how it saved my sister's life. Anger. Breath.

Since the beginning, you have been breath,
and poetry.

You recollected how Black students were asked
to leave the room during the autopsy of white bodies.
Of my writing about this, you said,
that is my story. That is not your story.
And now, with the illness you could not speak of for years,
Mother, am I once again turning your words
and your silence into a poem?

Old photographs

On my desk is a photograph of you
taken by the woman who loved you then.

In some photos her shadow falls
in the foreground. In this one,
her body is not that far from yours.

Did you hold your head that way
because she loved it?

She is not invisible, not
my enemy, nor even the past.
I think I love the things she loved.

Of all your old photographs, I wanted
this one for its becoming. I think
you were starting to turn your head a little,
your eyes looking slightly to the side.

Was this the beginning of leaving?

No Name

My parents only bought stuff in bulk or on discount, No Name brands. They saved up for years, saying no to all our requests, then bought everything in cash, even the car. Eventually we learned not to ask for things, not even to want them. Even desire was pared from us.

Our salt was no name. Our milk. Our clothes. Ourselves. In their plain white boxes with blue writing, the label of No Money fell on us through these objects, stuck to our skin, told us that we ourselves were generic, interchangeable. “No name” was clear on our bodies. To not matter at the level of skin was the law, but to not matter at the level of what we wore and ate – that cut deeper than law.

Now after all those decades of discipline, something is loosening, being overwritten by the body, by the present. My mother grumbles about a spoon or doek¹ she cannot find in the endless maelstrom of the house and I try to salve the loss by repeating something I’ve heard from her all my life, daai is maar doenia se goete – these are only earthly things. But I am on the earth, she replies, suddenly unanswerable. Yes, she is on the earth and Parkinson’s has given her permission to turn to what has been refused, deferred, forbidden, not-now.

Not. Non. Non-white. The power of that negative, that emptiness, against the fullness of white. Non. No. During apartheid, we created a potent No of our own in order to resist, to struggle. We understood that to withdraw ourselves, to disappear deliberately, to call attention to our absence, would make our Non matter. If we don’t exist for you, we bargained, how does it feel when our money, our labour, our presence doesn’t? Our potent No’s grew and boycotts cut against the Non and against the non-existence of us. We screamed against the blank, the No Name. We refused, we said No to the Non.

But it was not Yes. A No against Non is not Yes. It was still raging against, and on the other side was fullness, desire, Yes. To us who had been made into fractions, into nothing, into not-on-this-earth, *Black* offered a new home, a fullness. And yet it was a public fullness, a fullness for the

¹ scarf

era of privation. We had No, we had boycotts, we withdrew into our complex silences and absence, but behind them was a private hurt, the hurt of the Non. And so upon freedom, No did not protect us from a certain emptiness.

When freedom came, we thought our public fullness was enough, we thought we were ready for the pell-mell factories of desire and debt. We learned to speak ever finer and finer languages of existence, and we felt in our blood, in our bones, in our being, that existence lay in labels, in brands, in names. We rejected homemade food for restaurant buffets and wines with mythical price tags. We shuddered from the shame of rough hems sewn by our mothers after work and discarded them for the machine-made, even in my house where my father was a tailor and my mother worked for the unions and we could recite facts about labor conditions and open borders and product dumping and job losses. But what we knew consciously was nothing to what we knew in our skin.

In the old days I would walk into a shop in Cavendish Square, two streets from the house in Ingle Road that my family was removed from, and already by the way I inhabited my body, I showed that I didn't belong there. I was No Name. Now I can walk up to the shop assistant and hand her what I desire and pay for it, go into debt for it and know that this is mine, this is me. I am not generic. Not No Name. Not nothing.

Don't tell me that the small hurts don't matter, that our private emptiness doesn't count. Every label visible on the outside of the garment is a scream against Non. In freedom we wear brands on our skin until we believe what they say, until no one can tell by our clothes who exists and who does not. We buy our existence. Our bodies clothed in labels, we ourselves become brands, names. At last we are not nothing, we are a name, we exist.

On this earth. I am on this earth.

Focal Length

I take out the black and white photos
I carried with me to this country
and haven't looked at for years
and stand them next to one another
on the dining room table.

In one, my mother is young, standing
by the window, holding the telephone
with its spiraling black cord to her ear,
the curtain slanting to the side
as she turns toward the camera.

When I unwrapped them, the tissue paper
had only one set of creases, untouched
since she packed them for their long journey.

In the soft focus of faded paper I am on her lap,
leaning against her like gravity.
She is looking at me, like my father
who is taking the picture.

My face is clear and hers slightly blurred,
as though his eyes are moving between us,
as though the camera cannot capture
the eye's oscillation between two people
one loves at the same time.

Another photo had been folded into three,

bent once and then again to fit into a pocket,
close enough to the skin to warm the paper
then smoothed out again to fit into a wooden frame.

In it, I am turning sideways toward the camera
– someone must have called my name –
and a line creases just beneath my eyes.

Folded, hidden, forgotten,
memory doesn't come to me straight.
The pleat of the curtain as she leans against it,
the paper keeping its original fold,
me turning toward my name.