

'Niki

You were born a woman
And grew into a child
When my women whisper of you
Speak of you in dark voices
peppered with pity and disappointment
I feel my defence rise up
frozen
a composite corpse
that rises in me and speaks.

“Don't speak about her like that”

A defence that I now know
is hard and hollow
like the cave I imagine in you, concave
when he scooped the good
out of you
when he scooped the warm
out of you
when he scooped it all
out of you
when he beat you.

'Niki.
My blood boils when I think
of the virus
now boiling in your blood

'Niki
You were a woman
but you became a child
bearing an endless line of children

first Tokoloho
from an unknown father who died an unknown death
Tokoloho my play-brother
His 5-year old self mischievously mucking about with my mother's matches
while my 3-year old self
looks on
face pressed against the glass sliding-door
locked in
with no way out as I watch his 5-year old self
start flicker fires that almost burn the house down

Tokoloho
who grew into trouble
who, come Christmas-time could not bear thoughts

of being alone
so he grabbed a rope that spanned the scope of suffering
wrapped the length of disappointment 'round
and tied his tired 24-year old self
on the end of it and prayed for peace

but the rope broke

Tokoloho, whose name means freedom
Tokoloho, who now pushes trolleys in the
supermarket of regret

'Niki
Your womb woke up again
A girl-seed this time
that tried desperately to hide
from women who knew better
who saw the swell of cheeks and turned their eyes
to the dust on the ground
who sighed with soft voices filled with salt
when they saw the sag in your stomach
but still you hid
until you couldn't hide anymore

Her name was Tshepiso
Brought into the world by shaking hands
My 11-year old self donating an unwanted bear
pink as her little curling fingerlings
new and small and sad
After a few short months, a day sticks out and calls to me
Car parked after a day of school, mother tells me
Your baby, so unacquainted with the world
has already left it
My mouth copies the shapes my mother's makes
"Pneumonia"
I cry raw tears
when I think that my now-sister shares a name
with a dead baby
Tshepiso, whose name means promise

'Niki
I don't have any words
They don't belong to me
When I think of all the violence pressed on you
I remember when a night-clad man carved your face
with broken glass
broken bottle
broken brown
And you hid behind a handkerchief for months

so that I wouldn't have to see your face
your eyes spoke differently
and sparkled mischief to my smiles

'Niki
How much more violence, *hê?*
You suck it up
turn bruises into babies
two pairs of twins
two pairs of girls, such pretty pain
four girl children to be raised with the man
who raised a *fist to your flesh*

'Niki
Who raised a procession of us
'Niki
Equal parts child and child-bearer
'Niki
My memory-mother
'Niki
I don't have any words.