The Scent of You Lingers

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Grandma,

It's been a while since we talked. You're in my thoughts. You leak into my thoughts when I begin to forget you. I do not forget you. I'll be preoccupied with life, paying bills, brushing my teeth, running a thick comb through my locks, listening to a Canadian singer, Sarah McLachlan, and suddenly, you're with me, seeping through my porous self like thread entering the eye of a needle.

Remembering

I think of my grandmother when I think of place. She traveled a lot, knew a lot, but she was also lucky. To the best of my knowledge she never fell ill. If any of us (grandchildren) suffered a headache, she would ask how that felt. Then, she would say something about a cut. Apparently, in her days, pain in the head was treated by making a cut above one's temple or on the forehead to relieve pressure. Blood would be discharged, and the person restored to health. I was curious how many cuts a frequent headache sufferer could get in a lifetime, and was assured not many, since headaches were not as common as they are now. I find myself wanting to suggest this ancient cure to those afflicted with migraines but then I don't.

Grandma gave birth to nine children—the ones I know—including my father. She'd be laboring in the garden, harvesting beans or weeding sorghum and her own

labor pains would arise. She'd rush home, wash up, get a knife or razor, whichever was in sight, to cut the cord. Then she'd move into her bedroom and give birth unassisted. She would clean the baby, wrap it in warm clothes, then grind sorghum on the grindstone, make porridge, and finally beat the familiar sound and rhythm that announced a birth on the drums. Transitional events like deaths, weddings, funerals, and initiation ceremonies were also communicated through distinct drumbeats. For instance, tuddum, tuddum, tuddum, called people to a funeral ceremony. A single beat repeatedly—duh, duh, duh, duh—conveyed death. Quick happy beats, paba-paba-pabababababah, invited people to a wedding. When Grandma did her birth sound, people would show up to see the baby and from then on, she'd have the customary four days of rest.

Being in Motion

I learnt a lot of history from her, migrations of her people escaping famine or some other trouble from village to village, so it is not surprising that when I thought of travel writing, where or what home is and the diaspora, Grandma naturally showed up to lead the way. In one of her travels before she met my father's father, she had settled in a place called Bukoba, which is in present-day Tanzania. It's hard to know exactly how old she was, but in her accounts, she mentioned that her breasts had formed, they were round and ripe like oranges, and she had seen the moon (gotten her period). Two important signs that reveal she was of marriageable age. So she married and had children. In those days, I am told, girls developed breasts between fifteen and eighteen years old, unlike nowadays when nine-year-olds can look like mature women with breasts, menses, and other early adolescent-adulthood signs.

Some years later, Grandma and her people figured that whatever they had run away from in Uganda had passed, and it was time to return. Just like that, they trekked back and ended up in the village of Muyebe where she met my grandfather and married him. That would be her second marriage. There were no marked routes and most journeys were through forests, bushes, or along the river banks. I'm not certain that they could have come back to the place they had originally left. For a long time, I did not think about her story until I was in my early twenties. I happened to be in Eldoret, Kenya, taking a course in Publishing Studies at Moi University. One of the participants in my group was from Bukoba, and when he spoke in his mother tongue, I understood him perfectly. I was surprised! How could he speak "my language" when his native tongue belonged to not only another tribe but country as well? The majority of local languages spoken in Uganda, like Rukiga-Runyankole, Runyoro-Rutooro, and Luganda, are not shared with other nationalities outside Uganda's borders. Then I remembered that my grandmother had lived in Bukoba. So it was possible that I was meeting a family member I had forgotten I had. Through research, I found out that the Haya people, a Bantu ethnic group that inhabits Bukoba, and my people—the Bakiga in Western Uganda—use more or less the same dialect and eat the same food, which they prepare in similar ways. When the people from

my region end up in Bukoba, they find a home away from home.

In my family, we recognize Muyebe as our ancestral home and that's where Grandma and Grandpa are buried. It's also where they spent their last years, and where my father was born. My siblings and I were born elsewhere, but while growing up, we were taught the totems and taboos of our clan, so that wherever we go, we would always remember where we came from.

As a patrilineal society, I was trained to recite my father's line of descent all the way to the 14th male, by way of introduction. My name alone wasn't important if it didn't have my ancestry's backing. My audience would need about five to seven minutes for me to finish introducing myself: I am so and so, daughter of so and so, who is son of so and so, son of so and so, son of so and so… until someone kind would pass me a glass of water. When I learnt to ask questions, beginning with place—where all these so and so's came from, the answer was, "all over." Vague, at most, but what I took away was that they lived and traveled like nomads. There was always something they were looking for: safe pastures, water, food, a place to raise the young and have a garden. They found home in different regions, which, then, were not countries as we know them now.

Grandma said that she originated in Boma. I know Boma as a port town on the Congo River. I wasn't taking notes when she was telling us her stories, so when I began writing, after she was deceased, I had a moment of doubt. Did she say Boma or Boga? I got hold of the African map and thought it could have been Boga in Eastern Congo and I may have mixed up the names. With her people they would have moved along the Kagera River, since the Haya people currently occupy the Kagera basin on the western shores of Lake Victoria. Memory not helping, I was trying to rely on a map that was not only fictional but faulty too, given that when Grandma traveled, it was from one land to another, borderless. The current geographical/colonial borders weren't applicable. Instead of the countries then, I was better off sticking with the names of the local places where she settled—if I could remember them correctly—because they have pretty much remained the same, and they imply that I have relatives in Tanzania, Uganda, Congo, and probably Burundi and Rwanda too. Now, some ugly facts:

During the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, bodies were disposed of in Kagera River and they flowed into Lake Victoria and became a serious health hazard in Uganda. We abstained from eating fish, especially when we realized what was making the fish fat, and the fishermen who cleaned the fish couldn't stop talking about the wedding rings and human fingers they'd found inside the fish. If we had missed the idea that we have always been connected, that the environment has always linked us even when some groups of people or nations insist on holding themselves apart (as separate nations or identities), then, more than ever, perhaps, the land was determined to show us the common humanity that we are, that we share, even through dreadful circumstances. Cooperating with land, the waterbodies in their fluid but persistent manner were bent on hammering that lesson into all of us and our neighbors with whom we share the big lake. No longer would Uganda turn a blind eye to what was going on in Rwanda.

Clearly, Grandma is not the only one who mapped a geography with her ways and plight. Aimé Césaire writes in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, "And my special geography too; the world map made for my own use, not tinted with the arbitrary colors of scholars, but with the geometry of my spilled blood" (45). It's important to realize how Césaire's time and the experiences he was writing about mirror our own. I marvel at this connection of time and space that reveals how deeply history is shared through human bodies and the bodies of land or water. Stéphane Dufoix in *Diasporas* expands this notion further by highlighting different types and layers of geography that take place when two distinct categories of humans and land interact:

> An individual or collective movement across the surface of the globe is a geography in itself, a writing on the earth. The nomad inscribes a continual space that, like a Möbius strip, has neither beginning nor end, whereas the expansionist writes links between discontinuous locales, connecting them to a center. Another kind of writing occurs between the two that combines the original place and the space of dispersion in an original geography (37-38).

This makes sense especially when I try to think of the reasons why Grandma and her people would attempt to return to the place they had originally left when Bukoba, where they had settled, had given them shelter, food, and a community. For them, perhaps, movement/motion was a way of life, a continuous mapping with no end and no beginning. When Grandma became very old, my father convinced her to live with us. My parents had by then built a home and settled in my mother's village. We lived about four kilometers away from Muyebe where Grandma's house was up a steep hill. At our home she had, yes, a mother-in-law compartment. Yet, some days she would go missing and dad would instinctively know that she had gone back to Muyebe. Her house was no longer there but the land was, and my dad would find her sitting in her yard, completely at peace and at home. Now I know that her desire to go back did not spring from discomfort or lack, but was rather an integral part of how she had lived her life. We loved and adored her, we took good care of her when she could allow us. She was too stubborn sometimes to accept assistance, she always wanted to be the one offering help. She was about ninety-seven when she finally accepted to use a walking stick.

Undoubtedly, when people move, they change, and so do the spaces that they inhabit. They leave prints, traces of themselves, so to speak, in the landscape. Their language, ways of governance, culture, food, and architecture also take root. When Idi Amin's regime expelled Indians from Uganda in 1972, they left on the land and people their cuisine, dress code, and other imprints that are now passed on as Ugandan or African. The Ugandan poet, Susan Kiguli, in her poem, "Snapshots," makes it clear that although she "never saw the Indians leave / I have intimately touched / Their exodus in the story of my land" (82). The land as an active narrator breathing all our stories awakens in us a connection to all the human presences that have gone elsewhere, whose names we may not speak, yet rest in the grounds they previously tended before we came along.

The story of Uganda is not complete without spices that some people call Indian. We call them African: cinnamon, coriander, ginger, peppers, cloves, turmeric, garlic, tamarind, and strong teas. We grow and use all these in our foods and beverages, so it's appropriate to say that they are authentically Ugandan. At the time when the Indian Ocean Trade was thriving, between 800 A.D. to 1500's, these spices were massively produced in the coastal islands of Pemba, Zanzibar, then distributed and sold in the coastal cities of Mombasa, Malindi, Kilwa, and elsewhere. It is possible that some of these spices arrived from India and mingled with the local ones. The Monsoon winds favored travel from Asia to East Africa, and once more, bodies were connecting terrifically, from the Arabian peninsula, India, and Southeast Asia, to East Africa, thus giving birth to a distinct ethnic group and language known as the Swahili. Much as Swahili language is African—has more Bantu words—it also incorporates Arabic and Hindi words.

Herstory on History

Before I studied history at school, Grandma told me about the Great War (World War One) that was fought in Africa, and the men who were recruited from her village to form battalions of the King's African Rifles—KAR. The Ugandan group was the 4th regiment that fought in 1916 and 17, but recruitment of Ugandan men by the British East African colonial militaries began in 1902, and ended in 1962 when the country became independent. Grandma said that the men were drafted after a long, devastating famine, which had hit her village when she was a young woman with Breasts—emphasis hers. From the villages, the men were taken to Bombo barracks in Luwero district, then ferried across Lake Victoria to Kisumu, and finally by train to Nairobi. Training took place at Mbagathi, just outside Nairobi. The men fought against the Germans in German East Africa (Tanzania) and later on battled with the Portuguese in Mozambique.

As a child, I had a penchant for epics and heroic stories without critically thinking about them. Later, when my brain developed some reasoning capacity, I thought about these men who were engaged in a war that they knew nothing about, how absurd it really was that the British would enlist and expose these men's psyches to a bloody war which they had no intention to fight. Across Africa, similar recruitments of African men into colonial militaries were taking place. I've searched for information regarding payments to these gallant men and as you might guess, they were paid nothing. A few received medals for their bravery but not monetary compensation. Those who later fought in the Second World War against the Italians in Ethiopia, the French in Madagascar, and the Japanese in Burma suffered the same fate until the year 2000, when the survivors started requesting compensation from the British colonial officers. What about those who died? Did the soils and tall grasses that drank their blood, at least, provide cushion and comfort to their lifeless bodies?

Three days before my grandma died, she stopped eating and being active. All her life she had worked, even when we insisted that she stop doing housework. She was always the earliest to get up in the first light

of morning, and never caught any of our infectious germs that we'd generously pass on to whoever was sharing our space. The day before she died, she stayed in bed, said that she wanted to sleep a little longer. My father said the time had come. The next morning she was gone.

Her Body Manual

My grandmother died in 1998 when I was in the second year of my undergraduate college. She was probably aged between 101 and 104. Since then, I've wished for her strength, charisma, and resourcefulness. She was always weaving baskets or fixing mats, shelling peas, beans, picking vegetables, getting her hands dirty all the time. Her energy never wavered. Her eyesight was remarkable. She still managed to fit the tiniest thread in the eye of the smallest needle, while my mother found it difficult to pass thread through a big eye needle. When I read Ray Bradbury's *I Sing the Body Electric*, I recognized my grandma. Tonight she appeared in my dreams, sat regally in my orange armchair and seemed neither strong nor frail. She wanted me to wash her feet. I started moving about, pretending that I was looking for water and a basin. I was only hoping that my young sister would pass by and the task of washing my grandma's feet would fall on her. That's exactly what happened.

Relieved, I resurfaced and started weeding the garden in the yard. The sweet potatoes were bursting the grounds so I dug them out. They were very big. I showed them to my parents but they were not as excited as I was about their size. I decided that we would eat them with fresh beans. Some of the laborers who normally worked with us in the fields helped me to shell the beans. I promised them a good meal, said we'd all eat the beans with potatoes. I moved to the kitchen to prepare the meal only to find a maid with four other girls mashing already cooked sweet potatoes in very large pans. The potatoes were yellow and orange, firm and exploding with starch. They hadn't been peeled. It occurred to me that it was the first time we were mashing sweet potatoes. We had always mashed Irish potatoes, though. I made a note to call my sisters later and find out what else might have changed in our cuisine without my notice.

Dwelling

When I become a lotus flower,

Grandma shall say, welcome!

to the Field of Green. There will be

muu dancers in kilts and feathered

head gear, shaking their hips,

jumping higher up, scattering dust.

I'll slip into the role set up for me

by the dead. I shall be happy home.

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