

District to Cervix: The Time Before We Were Born

by

Tlotlo Tsamaase

After-born:

“Do you forgive me?” I asked.

“For what, nje?” he asked as we settled into an undeveloped green zone, a shade to hide sins.

“There’s a reason why I approached you from the onset,” I said.

“No shit. No one like your bourgeois type starts a friendship with types like me unless it’s to earn public image points. It was all snaks. But hell, you’re paying so I was hundreds. Mara, tell me, what did your cherry-picking activity score you? ”

My hands trembled, slick with sweat. A swallow deep in my throat. Above us, the sun dispersed itself, into light, a spectrum.

“I think I remember everything because it wasn’t right what I did,” I whispered, sickness swirling in my stomach. My life had been a seeking of redemption.

“Remember what, joh?” he asked, crushing leaves into his palm, wrapping them slowly.

“I’m going to tell you a story, a story you’ll struggle to believe. You’ll think it’s snaks, but,” I said, bowing my head, “it’s my fault your life is the way it is.”

He sat up, his joint lingering in his dark brown fingers. “Ijo.”

“Just light it, bra,” I said. “You gonna need it.”

Fire ignited and smoke evolved us as I dug into the deepest recesses of my mind of seventeen years ago,

the time before I was born:

In 17 hours, I will be born.

The male figure of a clan is deceased. His granddaughter-in-law is scheduled to give birth the following day. Discussions are held between the living-elders and the living-dead

ancestors, with the sangoma as the interpreter, the medium, the shaman. And who are we? Sexless souls warring to be born through the granddaughter—the way *we* want. My application to be born was approved several days ago.

We sexless souls stand in a veiled terrain waiting for the new regime to select which wombs our births will lie in and which we'll fight for. Our wars are oft-salted with the palm of death, seeking our births, our genders, our ethnicities to feed from.

Maybe you're the kind to have died before you were born.

Do you remember what you said that hot winter ago? I do.

"Yazi choms, this is better than surgery." You paused then, allowing the silence to sit in my chest and knees where everything felt sallow.

"What's the catch?" I asked.

"There's no reincarnation without death." Your hands slid forward business-like. *"All you have to do is die."*

So simple, such a joke.

"Then what?" I played along.

"You choose who you're born from, how, in what sex and all that shit."

I scoffed. *"All that shit, huh?"* I felt desperate, desperate enough to believe it. *To have the gender, ethnicity and even choose the family I wanted. I could be born rich—into a rich family. I could have it all.*

"Dude, you don't have a job," you said, counting off all my jinxes on your steel-ringed fingers. *"You're fucking squatting on someone's couch. You've no parents. You've no cash to pay for the hormone therapies or surgeries you're always going on about."* You surrendered your hands, your way of waving the white flag. *"You know I don't beat around the bush, bra. Telling it as it is."*

I slowly unwrapped my hands from the fist-shapes they'd formed. "This just feels like a snaksnyana prototype techno-ish."

"You get to have everything you've wanted. You get to choose." Your lips twisted. *"Think of it as a fusion of science and muti."* That was always the mantra. Every reincarnate knew it.

That's what you said, but you never told me it'd be a war. Never. A fusion of science and muti. Nxa, now look what the fuck happened.

Now:

I, along with the other pre-borns, sink our sights into the gathering site that lies several soul panels away from the next satellite eco-city. The kgotla has sharp bark-teeth stuck

skyward, a half-womb holding young women who gather and consult their old-dead for advice. It's closing to the deadening night, so preparations for my should-be birth are in process. Most often, lives were laced in old-women tongue; they sewed all dreams, stitch-to-sleep, lacing it around eyes of the village citizens.

It was they who guarded passion, dream, motive.

Birth denied, some. Birth granted, others.

The sky wept itself of all things for two unborn babies, transparent of identity, remained buoyant in their womb-carriers, waiting for us to shape them, fill them out with our spirit. The kgotla was still indecisive of which pre-born/reincarnate/spirit would grow in the unborn heirs to their clan. Even after the decision was made, each pre-born would go on their sojourn with the opportunity to win their birthright, which might oppose the kgotla's "special" requests. Even though a science was concocted to give men birthing rights, there were only two open slots this season that a myriad of us reincarnates were vying for. I can't fail to be born this season. Failure means either death or exhausting the birth application period or being thrown into the womb-prison for years. I have waited many seasons, many dehydrating moons, and burning suns to allow this to pass by easily.

The pre-borns hush at the development in the kgotla, a tribal meeting of seven younger women. Through veiled sight—that neither after-borns can see through except us, pre-borns—the sky clock is nearing birth-horizon. We watch over the kgotla proceedings' decision that may give us our new bodies:

"The reincarnates await our decision—our figurehead is deceased," said the third-younger woman, in a stern, curt tone. "The sojourn is tonight. It will guarantee the heir's birth. We will train him, adorn him, and perfect his upbringing."

Traditionally, age dictated wisdom, but here the number of reincarnations that one *had* dictated wisdom. "Eldest" was defined as one with the highest reincarnation count, when in actual fact, they were the youngest in human years.

The fifth-younger woman held her hand up. "Sisi, be careful of the pronoun you use. That 'he' may be born as a 'she'."

The stern one shook her head. "We have already chosen who we want born into our clan. We have picked two reincarnates based on their previous lives that indicate an aptitude in political studies, bravery, courage and a show of altruism. One male, one female."

"Who will be born first?" asked the sixth-younger woman, a new addition to the conference who had many light moons that marked her youthful face. Wisps of the night braided themselves into dreadlocks knotted on her head, pointing to sky.

“The male of course,” the third-younger said.

“Of course? Maybe that’ll happen in patriarch eco-city 1, not in ours, matriarch eco-city 1,” the six-younger said, narrowing her eyes. “Perhaps you should cease your immigration status and relocate back to your state.”

The third-younger steamed. “We should meld their spirit into one male body then. That way no conflict would ever arise.”

The first-younger, who had ochres of ash beaded across eir sleek forehead to the tip of eir nose to mark eir bogosi, eir highest chieftaincy, said, “They both deserve to be born at the same time, not one second late or one second earlier. This will avert any lower feelings of self-esteem in their childhood. One is not more important than the other is. We must wield their bond strong from the get-go.” No one could quite tell where the first-younger’s gender and ethnicity lay for eir had many births, many deaths, many lives and often the gravity and law of this world failed to portray eir succinctly; so the air was less translucent near eir form, and sound waves weren’t born with the right chord to play eir voice through. Because of eir multiple and diverse reincarnations, eir was unlike others who’s judgment was diluted by personal agenders. Therefore her opinion, her judgment became law. And because of this, no one could quite tell if she was dead or alive, or what her name was, often referred to as Eir across all languages.

“But how will the two reincarnates leave the uterus at the same time?” the third-younger asked.

“There will be two womb-carriers,” Eir said.

“That requires a high power of soul energy, and our soul panels are at their lowest function,” the third-younger said.

“High prices and sacrifices are a prerequisite to our self-sustaining goals,” Eir said.

“But communities will live in the dark.”

“We have provided them with soul-energized lamps,” Eir said.

The other younger women grumbled at the third-younger woman’s imprudent manner of questioning their leader.

At this, Eir stared at the sky-clock waning in night sky. Each younger had on a sky-clock that told them the time of the womb, for the moon lay curdled in the dark night, and once it became full moon did it portray the minute of birth. Right now the clock was quarter-waning moon, still many hours from birth. This sky-clocked was etched into their wrists in golden wisps of metal and (lunar) technology.

“The new regime defines that choice lies with the reincarnates,” stated the fourth-younger, once Motswana who switched to Chinese status linguistically after she failed to obtain her desired ethnicity in her sojourn. “Whoever you choose will define what gender, ethnicity, and religion they choose to be born as.”

“Our homestead has negotiated for one female and one male finish and klaar.” The third-younger swept her hands together into a clap. “The woman must give birth to the twins as per her stipulated traditional role,” she said.

The second-younger woman—who chose “mixed ethnicities” as her birthright fought well during her sojourn to win it—shook her head. “No, several men in the community have been selected as potential womb-carriers—”

“The husband has duties,” the third-younger declared.

“And so does the wife. Baby-carrying must be a fifty-fifty task carried by *both* parents,” the second-younger said.

Eir watched with narrowed eyes, nit-picking every argument mentally. Eir stood, and everyone hummed in silence. “What’s most important to the clan is the spirit, not the shell, not how the body, this soul-holder, looks. It is but a glass that can be shattered easily, whereas the spirit is an eternal fountain of all good things. If you sway your decision on the cosmetics of a soul-holder, then we may as well pick any cheap soul that will fail this clan. We do not want a weak spirit dressed in an ‘acceptable’ body. We just want a spirit. Whatever form it comes in—”

The third-younger jumped forth. “But these values are necessary to our tradition—”

“Traditional values should not be a crutch for dictators to sacrifice man for inequality and personal ethos,” Eir said. “This is exactly why last year the law was sanctioned for man to share birthing actions. Agreed?”

Still unsatisfied, the third-younger said, “Either way, the reincarnates still have to battle for this birthright—*that* does not guarantee their survival.”

Eir continued, “Both the parents will give birth—the twins must be born—not just one, but two children.”

Some other younger-women shuffled, tied their tonkana blankets tighter around themselves and agreed. No one participated in going against the first-younger’s decision. Their faces were laced with wrinkles, and hands soft with time.

“Although bodies are renewable resources, souls still remains as a non-renewable energies to vitalize the body, which we are in short supply of—hence the reincarnation sanction,” Eir said. “We must be careful that our decision tarnish not this non-renewable

energy for it could vanish forever and our eco-city will cease to exist. Heed well, the granddaughter and womb-carrier hold two babies whose sex and ethnicity are undecided. They are scheduled to be born in a few hours whether the reincarnates or we come to a decision or not. The longer we take in our indecisive acts, the more it will jinx the twins. The objective remains the same, the twins will be the heirs, whatever they choose to be born as. This homestead will support them.”

Our satellite hearts were moons for our bodies.

Nearby, the outdoor kitchen was a hotpot of the men’s voices, preparing tea, preparing bread, waiting for the women to decide, for the women to slaughter an offering to the ancestors once a decision was made.

Eir stretched her hand to the center where our former exhumed bodies that we shed years ago lay, wires attached to them, trying to alchemize the art of incubating souls. Soul energy lights our city, runs through the venous system of everyday life; without it, we remain in a dark world.

Eir gestured to the sangoma: “Give the selected reincarnates our decision and give us their response.”

The sangoma kneeled in the womb-shape gathering, nodded his approval, shook dust into fire and began relaying the message to the ancestral land where we waited, which was veiled from all living sight. He danced with night and fire, dust his mathoa, into

the realm where I stood with another pre-born for we were selected for the twin-roles—

After-born

“Hold up. Am I supposed to believe this? That you can choose how you want to be born before you’re born?” he asked, laughing.

“Well, traditionally, women got pregnant and the baby’s sex was determined at seven weeks pregnancy. Nowadays the sex is determined during our sojourn which occurs when the mother is in labour. Sex, gender, religion are determined during the mother’s labor as we fight for the birthright. From war we are born. Before we were contained in a limbo stage for the full 40 weeks, but sometimes babies were born without spirits, which were snatched away in their slumber before they dripped into the form of the developing baby. Soul-tech was developed as a defensive mechanism to align the sojourn and gender selection during the mother’s labor so it happened in a matter of hours.”

“Fuck san, you must be higher than I am to say that with a straight face. I hope you’re not tuning the younger-women such dom shit during your meetings, otherwise you gonna lose your authority. S’tru.” He crossed his fingers, swearing.

My nails bit into his hands leaving wounds. "Believe me, assablief. I'm not lying. We were in soul-form watching everything."

His eyes grew wide taking in my panic. "From where were you soul-watching?"

"Angazi, I can never know where," I said. "Our former dead bodies lay prostrate right in the center of the kgotla, wires leashed to the sangoma."

"In our eco-city?" he asked.

"Ja, ours," I said. "The sangoma posed, like a jeweled metallic device, expressing what we wanted of our births. Post-birth, we're never supposed to remember our soul-lives, the intermediate space before being born. They said we'd recall these pre-birth memories when we're a newborn, but after some time as you grow older, time dilutes those memories from you mind. Something must be wrong with me to remember," I said, staring at him, guilt gutting me.

"So you got introduced to this reincarnation idea because of someone? Yet it didn't turn out good?"

"Ja, something like that," I said, voice faltering, afraid to go on, wanting to remain vague and hidden.

"Mate, you're not close to convincing. Look, until you show evidence that all this talk is real, I'm not going to believe you. It's just crazy and you look crazy. I just came out here to chill. I don't know what kind of things you're mixed up in, but I don't want all this heavy shit, ja. Sort yourself out or I'm out of here."

"I have evidence," I blurted. "I just need time. Just listen. Please. I'll show you the evidence soon."

He settled back onto the log we sat on. "I don't like where this is going. I don't feel right."

"Trust me," I whispered.

"But why me? Why are you so insistent on telling me?"

"Because...I saw you before you were born."

His arms drooped into the grassland. "You're scaring me." He backed away from me. "Don't touch me. You don't sound like your normal self."

"I'll keep my distance just as long as you promise to listen," I said, "because I'm not letting you get away until I've told you my story even if I have to restrain you."

His eyes scanned our surroundings for a soul in sight and truly noticed how isolated we were, how I'd intended for us to be alone. Not even his scream would reach a savior. I watched his mind dissolve itself into ugly thoughts of the harm I could bring him.

“Okay,” he said, realizing his misfortune. “I’ll listen if you promise to let me go once you’re done.”

I nodded. “Where was I? Right. So what happened next is after the younger-women chose me and another reincarnate to be born through the granddaughter, we had to give our decision, but the other reincarnate and I argued about

how we wanted to be born:

Pre-born veil

“What’s up?” the reincarnate asks me. She’s dressed in her last-reincarnate seasons’ form, personality and lingo, a way to identify each other before we can adopt new identities. A buoyant glow we both are. Her being is sporadic, unable to settle in one position, bursting like stars into space. “Guess you’re going to be my twin. Do you reckon we’ll look alike? ‘Cause that’ll be a new thing I’ll have to add to my resume, joh.”

“It makes no difference to me as long as I’m born,” I say. I inhale her being to get a sense of who she truly is. She is of many evolved births, she is therefore powerful. She could win this sojourn—my selection. Most often souls are genderless, sometimes cultureless as I am.

“So it’s been decided that one of us will be male-born and the other female-born,” she says. “I call shotgun for the female-born role. It’s my discipline.” She winks.

“Like every other sojourn, you’ll will have to fight me for that,” I say.

“I ain’t going to be male.” She circles me. “Yazi, your birth has *only* been approved after how many failures? You gonna waste that? Look, let’s not waste the sangoma’s time and get this over with. Reconsider: what did you choose to be born as?”

“First-born *female*,” I emphasize, “Black. The mother will be my womb-carrier. My occupation: illustrator/story-teller. Marriage: wife Sufia Habib, birther of four children, architect of soul energy incubators.” Everything in my life will draw me toward that goal—failures, successes—even if I won’t remember when childhood ceases my pre-born memories.

She whistles. “Haebo, you’re losing privilege one rung at a time. So what exactly did the ancestor’s ruling choose for you?”

I shuffle. “First-born male. Black. The mother as my womb-carrier. Occupation: political leader. Three wives, arranged marriages.”

“What death age did you choose?” she asks. “Need to know in case you die early and I have to take over shit.”

“I want to die when I’m 120 years old.”

She laughs. “Ijo! Good luck with your battle to birth to win that right. It’s going to be tough.”

I turn, surprised. “What age did *you* choose?”

“Mmm, 50. When time hasn’t quite touched me yet, you check.”

Explains a lot of why she’s had many reincarnate seasons: she always resigned from each season early. It didn’t make her powerful but deceptive. No wonder someone with so many reincarnate seasons wasn’t quite at ancestor level.

“But hold up, you said your wife will be—she doesn’t sound like she’s in any one of our tribal eco-cities,” she says.

She was right. Our built environment was split into eight tribal eco-cities and counting, protected in their architecture and some married into others either pre- or post-birth for self-sustaining values. Often this enriched the economy and soul-energy to power our living.

“I know her because our love was unfinished from the last reincarnate season,” I say.

She peers at me, closing in to my face as if to enter my mind. “Come closer, I can’t see what you looked like in your last after-born season.”

“I wanted it censored for privacy reasons,” I say.

Her sigh is equivalent to the sinking and coalescence of her soul-lit being.

Her being surrounds me as she says, “It is a painful act to be born. The path from the womb into the real world moves through several dimensions—anything could happen in that passage, in that limbo. If you accept the younger-women’s ruling, I mean, once you die, it takes time, but you will rise to be an ancestor—a powerful ancestor. An honorary bestowed once you surpass stages.”

She’s trying to sway me so her sojourn is easier.

I send threatening signals her way. “Then why don’t you be male-born?”

“It’s not what the kgotla decided. Besides feelings are not important,” she says. “Do you want to suffer? I mean, what if you’re still-born just because you refused to comply, joh? Or what if your mother has a miscarriage? Or the chick is some junkie and she ain’t ready to have a baby—and she aborts you? We don’t know who she is, and she’s supposed to give birth to one of us. Even if you win the sojourn, your mother-to-be is a stranger who has her own agenda. Besides, being female-born, they’ve child-rearing obligations, pregnancy and periods. Why they hell do you want to bleed?”

“Shouldn’t that be your problem as well?” I ask.

“Mmm, not really, ja. I opted to have that out. Not really interested in those logistics. I just want the body, ja, not any of its clingy attributes. So, ja, my battle for birth is also going to be a challenging one.”

Clingy attributes. The definition of a woman has changed dramatically over the years. “Doesn’t change my decision,” I say.

The pre-born veil grows lava-red from my fury heightening the kgotla fire, which rises as if it’s my soul. The sangoma breathes in our feud, preparing to relay it to the younger-women.

I disperse my being throughout the room; I suspect this is what Sunset must feel like when she transcends Horizon. “Take the male-born role.”

Her smirk wraps cold around me. “No. I too selected first-born female, as well as male-born, and Black,” she says. “But I have the upper hand. I chose what no one would, given the new law: I chose the father as the womb-carrier. I will be born as neither but both male and female.”

I slouch back, and so do my furies.

Her being is airborne, voice a hush: “Men give birth, too.”

Kgotla:

After the conclusion of our heated conversation, the sangoma turned back like a dog with a tale between his legs and gave the younger women in the kgotla our decision. He said, “The two chosen reincarnates’ decision is as thus: the male-decided one wants to be born as a girl from the wife.” He coughed. “The female-decided one wants two things: to be born as both and neither male nor female from—” he coughed and shuffled in the grave-dust—“from the father.”

“Neither and both?” the third-younger asked, perplexed.

The sangoma shrugged. “The female-decided one wants the choice for her body to portray those characteristics. On some days, they will look neither male nor female. On other days they will pass of as both male and female.”

“Jerusalema! This is absurd.” The third-younger slapped her hands into her knees. “This is not close to what we agreed to.”

“The clause suggests the reincarnates are allowed to choose their identity as long as it does not stray far away from human physiology,” Eir said.

“Do we honestly want such stubborn reincarnates in our clan?” the third-younger asked.

“They have made their decision, now they must fight for it,” Eir said. “And it shall be. Prepare the birthing rite.” Eir nodded to the sangoma, who was half-in and half-out in both worlds.

At this announcement, the men ululated in throngs of Kalanga, Setswana, Xhosa, a pre-celebration before the birth.

And so the moon leaked through the horizon as the community was swept with incense to guide the passed-away’s spirit; the smoke became breath. The funeral air was pregnant with grave-dust and snuff. Funerary rites followed, and the deceased ascended in totem-semblance, a hoof through the night, made of fire-flecks. Our soul-necks bent back, we watched the sky laced in gold. Slowly, the chief had ascended into ancestral reign, where eyes poked the night sky, awaiting which new born would escape the two womb-carriers several communities away. The mother was steadfast in one homestead, the other womb-carrier bordered a tall structure, moon his womb; fire bodies danced the night, dancing in form of the mother’s totem: which shall be dressed on her newborns. Despite both the reincarnates’ and the kgotla’s decision, most citizens’ prayers moaned for two heady girls, to incubate souls, for they had the alchemy of creating such as it was melded in their natural wombs.

Medicinal plant was kneaded into earth like an umbilical cord to ancestral reign, a safe portal of sustenance where burials for our former bodies would reside, a conjoining.

The younger-women coughed, smoke was exchanged, and mokuru stained their livers. Hearty laughter and arguments scrambled up their throats during those seven-hour contractions, for the night-hour was deepening into labour, and our veil turned humid.

I stared at the sky-clock; moon-wane dictated that seven hours remained until my birth. My sojourn had to be in that seven-hour frame otherwise I’d never be born.

And so the younger-women’s voice collected into the sky-phone, informing us, “The sky-clock is your compass. Reach the horizon and you reach birth. Your oxygen reserves are your fuel. Use it well to reach your birth-horizon.”

The soul-forms scattered like grains in the wind, the battle for birth begins.

After-born

“The battle for birth?” He laughs, retuning into that trusting mode, no more fearful of me. “This is the sickest story I’ve ever heard. You’re shitting me, angiti?”

“I’m being for real.”

“Nah, this is one of those creative episodes of yours,” he says. “Kaosane, you’ll be showing me slides of the graphic story you’re yakking to me now.”

“I could request the born facility to deliver me a memory of that time,” I say, “but it’s heavily buried in red tape—it could take years or many reincarnate seasons to obtain the pre-birth memory. But it’s all in here.” I tap my head. “I can’t ever forget it. I wish I could.”

The dilation of his eyes takes in the secret I’ve held for years, seeking shadow instead of light, a refuge. “That exists?” he asks.

I nod. “It’s a secret facility set aside for us, the experimented ones. That’s why I stole this,” I say, stretching out a pill-sized metal disk. “It’s going to need a lot of soul power. Our city will probably experience a black out.”

“What’s this?” he asks.

“The evidence I promised you. It’s a memory of the time before we were born. Just swallow it like a pill and you will see everything I tell you.”

That’s when he freezes, coughing the smoke halfway to his lungs. His hands jitter. “Did you see me in this pre-birth plek? Is that why you’re telling me this? What did I want to be? Did I fail? Is that why I’m like this.” He rattles his head. “Wait a minute. Now I sound crazy. This is mal, ja.”

“Just take it,” I say. “You don’t have a choice.”

The metal pill glints in his palm. He observes it and stares at me like I’m a freak. I push him back and press the metal pill into his mouth, the center of the pill blinking red, a signal, connecting, scanning for a memory until it settles into his sac and becomes a Bluetooth feed into his brain; swallowing was his acceptance to receive wireless transmission of a specific file from the memory bank. He convulses, unable to empty his guts, just heaving emptiness, hands to knees.

I fall to my knees, my face wet with tears. “I didn’t want to have to go to such lengths to get you to believe me. Ja, I remember you...but I have to explain first, so you understand exactly what happened during

the battle for birth

is oftentimes gruesome, bloody, a tearing away from the self.

Our future, our dream is like a mirage in the now, stands on our tongue, our skin, our cells—the illusion of what I would like to see myself—only momentarily because the brown of my skin begins to turn opaque at the loss of my other identity, mourning for what it can’t be without.

Time, an undisciplined currency in this rural runs very sparsely: the sun has been stabbed. Its hibiscus blood melts to the horizon and spreads into our crumbed soil, inflating our souls with evil religions.

We hate sharp things that point to the skies; teeth knocked out, the stars fell. They are strange things—the star-bombs—warriors of the sky, against the reincarnation, against some births. They become taboo, a deception, sometimes turning themselves into our totems to destroy us. They protect sky for it is our medium of birth. They all invigilate the districts of Botswana. I don't know why. They scan us according to gender because their sensors are drawn to holes, a pod of things where they can immerse their DNA into—the women a petri dish for their society. That's why all my former mothers and fathers made sure their daughters were men way before their birth. Before I was born, they decided my gender: male. Now, I search for the true one: female. I'm crazy, ain't I?

I need to reach the inyanga to gain access to my birth. I must journey through several districts to reach the cervix. I pray my totem will protect me during my journey. But I must too remember that no harm come to it as well. The air-veiled kwena—a reptile, my totem—will be my armor.

In a splatter of rain, the sky-clock announces the constriction of the built environment, chasms running its length, a danger zone. I'm not even close to what used to be veiled Gabs city, which is noticeable by its infamous sky, a derma of thin metal that projects a winter blue. My trail is latched onto by my twin-to-be.

“Stop following me,” I say.

“You will die before you are born,” she says.

“We are meant to be siblings, not enemies.”

“The born facility will sterilize our brains from our pre-born memories once we are born,” she says. “This feud of now will be a forgotten thing. You will love me. You will be my brother. And I”—she pauses, her soul-form making something of air—“I will be your sister.” Her sight fancies the terrain, smile sleek with some secret. “The battle to birth is such an underutilized rite: murder exists not in our vocabulary.”

It takes a while for comprehension to sink me into the waters of her meaning: she daggers at me with her form and limbs to slow me down, but she's thrown askew by the scaled tale of a reptile beckoning my protection. This I never expected from her. Slumber burns my eyes, fed by a sedative saturating the air. I expect her to be a lax-turning posture as I am but she scars me trying to render me close to dead so she reaches the sky-horizon first,

to gain her birthright first. The first one to reach it is granted all their identity wishes; the first one waits in a limbo space for their twin for they are to be born at the same time.

I kneel, taking in her attacks. I scratch the night, it opens, and I slip into a sleep pocket and curl into a hole of darkness, of inexistence; the dark vacuum around me becomes my pillow, my amniotic fluid I float in. Her betrayal has kneaded itself into my spinal cord like a tumor; the stab wounds on my limbs could translate through my birth, rendering me with paralysis in my limbs.

For now, I'm invisible to my enemy who only wishes to steal my gender from me, to murder for it.

Hours later, my context is different after my buoyant slumber in the sleep pocket: environment is made of dunes, soft. My twin-to-be is absent.

The dull sun screeches time against the backbone of present.

The toll of this region is oxygen. It is now my body is an hourglass leaking grains of air. My lungs are calibrated to filter the air that has polluted contents of the dead inhabiting the underground.

I walk, eyes ahead, ears pinned forward, antennae detecting danger: air-borne evils nostalgic of the night and insomniac of the day carry their buckets made of wild animal skin and cluck through the night in sounds of thunder. These crow-like creatures grate the night with steel-lined wings hoping to tear open the sky, hoping to reopen the sky's eye before its scheduled aperture.

A piercing screech scrapes the sky: my twin-to-be existing from the sleep pocket—a harsh rupture in air's skin—calling attention to us. We have expired our use of the sleep pocket and one must run now from the crow-like creature's focused vision.

I weave through man-sized metal pieces of what once was Sekgoma Memorial Hospital that jut out of Serowe's desert-sand landscape. Something beneath the earth is trying to stab us with gleaming steel objects of a dead hospital. She's crazy, the lengths she's going to so I'm eliminated.

Death is a heavy night spread above our heads.

But this world won't be my coffin.

I press the knob of my backbone to inch air slowly from my heaving chest, the taxation for walking this path. Until I'm out of this border, my oxygen is not mine; lung alone. I must

stop breathing, stop functioning temporarily to be free. I shield myself in the cloak of night waiting for the hunt to die down.

There is only a sky of unknown things— a sky that gives birth by aid of the inyanga, the midwife. I will meet her.

The witching wakes at 3 in the AM. Voodoo priests were fishing sometime now, at the crane of heartbeat. Sleep fogged my eyes until I fell blind. I have to wait until my irises wake.

Dust is the alternative surveillance system imposed into our land by the star-bombs. I tighten my doek around my nose, but my pores remain open. It's a fragile thing to be human-like. We're sleepless little beats of hearts in this sunless day.

I'm finally here. Kanye. The hills rise upward. Nature wants to flee. The courtyard boasts an un-born fire, but its faint silhouette is rapid and excited for flesh, not wood. The night sky is slightly bruised, the moon a stark, white eye, close to fullness.

The inyanga sits by the fire.

I take my place before the old woman, our knees crushed to the sand.

"The others aren't far behind," she says. "How old were you when you were released?"

"Excuse me?" I ask.

"The womb-prison." Her wooden body props up, brings up another wooden stick.

The womb-prison is a monolithic place that writes our existence. She is the guardian of the womb-prison where our pre-selves are either stored or restrained into its fly-smothered walls awaiting birth-days and releases.

I lower my head. "Eighteen years ago, I think. Why? I've been waiting so long for my birth application to be approved."

The old woman spits at the floor, taps the air, and instead of a sleep pocket opening, light blinks at us and undresses the night's blind eye: the concrete structure stands, piercing the pregnant sky. It's the womb-prison, pre-birth names tacked in metallic panels on its surface. A myriad archives of beings before birth.

Weight against it, her cane sniffs the wall.

"Choose," the sangoma says.

"I don't understand," I say.

"It is part of the new order: sacrifices pay for it. Your twin did an unlawful thing and tried to kill you for her birthright," the inyanga says. "This is what I can do for you. You will win. You will be born as however you want—three legs if you wish."

"No one said anything—"

“No one *ever* says anything. Now choose where to place her.”

“But then...*she* won't be born,” I say.

“Yet. She won't be born yet,” she corrects me. “Isn't that what she was trying to do to you?”

I sink back. “She was just desperate, ja. I don't want to put her away. The womb-prison is a terrible place to live in. I don't want it even for my enemies. Nyaa, she was trying to delay me *not* kill me.”

“Same thing. Are you truly and authentically born if it's not the identity you want? Can you say that you are really born?”

“Look, I thought we were supposed to journey to birth like we've always done—not decide what to do with the other reincarnate, persecuting them into that place.” I point at the womb-prison.

“Everything is an *evilution*. Consider that this journey *now* has a roadblock,” she says. “To get through you have to remove the obstacle or let your journey end here.”

“But the...the younger women chose us.”

“They chose you, but circumstances say otherwise.”

“If I refuse to put her in the womb prison?”

“Then she will put you in it. Your twin wants to be born alone. Siblings are oftentimes sacrificial lambs,” she says, smiling. “You won't be the first. And if she were here she wouldn't hesitate to find you a spot in the womb-prison. Now choose where she will go. She will be released much later, born much later.”

“But what will happen to her now when I put her in?” I ask.

“She will be stillborn. Her body will be recycled for the next batch,” the inyanga says.

The night, an abnormal quiet occasion, nudges me forward with a thick force of the air. A myriad of cases file the wall of the womb-prison library. In the wall is a slim aperture that I will input the memory of my twin distilled from my essence.

I choose. Moonlight lines the case's edges. A fire is born.

I step back. “What's going on?”

“The fire will process her spirit,” the inyanga says. “This ain't your usual type of fire. This is a different type of burning. She won't feel like she's burning. To get from the sky, you must also give to the sky. The smoke will rise, the sky will breathe it in. See how fast the moon waxes?”

Those eyes in the sky blink, sparkle and stare back at my village peeling the comfort from my skin. Around us, with this waking fire, are too many sky-scraping trees with winged

figures weighing down the branches. Within seconds the tiny creatures flit from the trees into the dark night; the world's alive with the noise of wings flapping—loud, whirring blades slice through the air.

I do it. I agree to the burning ritual, hoping the girl will be an incense for the night.

After long, we are in the hibernation period, rather the incubation period preceding the birth of the body that I will wear.

Placenta, the umbilical cord are seeds, the inyanga's muthi. She buries a piece of me in the land to kiss me to the ancestors, our home to return to when age melts our longevity. The grains of the earth are the browns of my skin.

A buzzing sound reverberates from high above. A siren. The star-bombs, policing, are aware of those to-be born who must be returned into the womb-prison. No one is meant to be born again—they must make certain of that.

The womb prison is where they keep those who failed the battle to birth, those who failed and may not return again. I watch the other reincarnates along with the one who was to be my twin. They try to hide in sleep pockets, fingers pulling strings of night, weaving them in and around them. But I remember the futile attempt. The sky unfurls and I have sent my twin-to-be to a womb prison, delayed birth. She will hate me. I will never forgive myself. But I have to be born.

The inyanga stares at me: "It's happening. It's time to be born."

After-born

"What the hell is this? How can I physically see and feel that?" he asked. "What have you done to me?"

"It's a virtual transport to a memory—everything feels as real the trees here," I said, gesturing to our surroundings.

"This is crazy," he said. "This can't be real."

"But it is. What you feel is the truth."

"Take this drug out of my body," he shouted. "Take it out."

"Calm down, you're just panicking because you've mixed two drugs in your body. Trust me, everything will be fine. It will wear off."

I watched him count his breaths, trying to calm himself down. He stared at me, noticing my thoughts wrecking me.

“Where do I fit into all of this?” he asked. “So you wanted to show me that this reincarnate tried to kill you? You were only retaliating. You got the birth you wanted. Look at you. Many births and all.”

It’s so weird how he could just switch from one emotion to the next for my benefit.

“You say that now...” I stared at the sky, at everything where ancestors live.

He paused, eyes half-asleep. “Does that mean I am born the way I am because of the journey I either failed or won? Does that mean I lost?” The ends of his lips tugged down. “I mean what life did I have before? Was I really meant to be colored? Did I choose my parents?”

“I knew telling you this would make you paranoid,” I said.

“It’s either I failed or I was a coward to choose what I wanted. Because, look, I ain’t happy, joh.”

“Does anyone truly know what they want?”

“I didn’t want this, joh”— he pointed to his tightly gauzed chest, keeping the illusion of breasts far away— “I know that. I feel that. Yazi, my sister—I feel like we were switched at genders.” He, the unborn part lay curdled in the she-frame of his body, a she that he hated. “I am he,” he once corrected me when I called him “that cherie over there.”

I realized in this world, words were powerful to them. It became their gender for those who could change nothing of their body except the words that claimed them in birth certificates, passports, Omang.

I feigned laughter. “What the fuck?”

“No, like, foreal. Instead of the switched-at-birth scenario, we have the at-birth switched genders. This happens to twins—born minutes apart or siblings born years apart.”

Years apart. How ironic.

“She’s your fucking sister, man. Stop burdening her with this shit,” I said. “It’s killing her the way you think.”

“I swear, my thoughts are going to be my murderers one day. Like, I fucking hate this shit. I don’t want to be bleeding every month,” he said.

Bile rose into my throat. Déjà vu. I don’t want to be bleeding every month. That was his answer and he couldn’t even see it.

The person he wanted to be was wadded knee-deep in loss, but my breath as knee-tight to my chest, couldn’t escape the words. Sometimes I felt like this present, this now was a memory we were recounting.

“Did I say something wrong?” he asked.

“I think I know why I remember everything,” I whispered, “my guilt kept me prisoner of the things I did. It’s getting a little harder for me to talk about this...memory, this secret.”

He gripped my hand. “I want to remember. So badly it hurts. Tell me what happened next to you? Were you happy with the end journey, your life?”

“Angazi,” I said: I don’t know. “Sometimes all of this doesn’t feel real. We die, and we repeat this cycle again, nje. Trapped. Death is just a machine that exercises your soul into the next-life body.”

“I want to do it,” he said, ignoring me. “Like you quoted to me: there’s no reincarnation without death.”

I had to say it now, or it’d be harder later. Get it over with.

“This is the third reincarnate season ever since I put my twin-to-be in the womb prison,” I said. “I was always looking for her. I realized she was born female instead of male, the one she wanted. And she tried to make herself look male. I found her here.”

“Here? Fuck san, who is she?” he asked.

“I saw her three months ago at the aquaponics and gender sector trying to raise funds for soul panels for her team that would grant transgender rights to citizens. That’s why I approached you, stayed by your side. That’s why I sponsored your idea, your team, and your values. I was trying to pay off for my shame, my guilt.” I bowed my head and cried into his hands, her frozen posture. “You...were right. I remember you.” I paused. “You were supposed to be my twin.

His lips turned into a grim line, mind dissolving the thought into anger, fists kneaded into her thighs. Sometimes I couldn’t tell which he was—shifting from her to he, the way they always wanted.

“Punish me—hit me, do what will make you feel better,” I said.

“Are you saying that I’m the twin who tried to kill you during our sojourn?” he asked.

I nodded.

“No, you’re lying. This is a kak story. I don’t believe you.” He pushed me. “Why would you say something as cruel as this? Are you telling me you put me in a womb prison? I failed my sojourn which explains why I was born in a poor family! So is my family being punished with poverty or am I? Did I lose my father because of this sick joke, this reincarnation shit you’re tuning me? So my pre-birth choices and what you did to me made me this way?”

“It doesn’t mean there is anything wrong with you.” I fell onto my knees. “You used to want to be both genders or neither—I guess our choices do change. You changed. But when you were released from the womb prison, you were born into a poor family into a gender you

didn't want because your sojourn didn't go well. The womb prison took so much of your strength and hope that you lost your will to fight for your birthright. I wish they hadn't pitted us against each other—we could have been siblings. I should have protected you. You were just scared.”

“You owe me. You fucking owe me.” He jabbed me with his finger. “Give me another memory pill.” His voice was thick with anger. “I need to see how you were you born.”

I swallowed, unsure what he would do to me, but I had to say everything, to relieve myself of the anxiety. I handed him another metal pill, watched him swallow it, and I said, “I was in a district that would lead me to the cervix,” I said. “They called that zone the

District to Cervix

is vague to my senses. In the born area, there is nowhere to hide except pain that seeks your senses.

Vigilance is strong nearing the sky's aperture.

The clouds gather, yellow glooms poke their way through the night and something up there with the skin of sky watches us in terror or excitement. A memory is wet and leaks down my cheek—blood. Clouds of orange, red, and yellow bloom against the sky, an orchard bleeding, opening and stretching in wispy tendrils of red to the horizon.

The sky is opening. Hope breaks my ribcage. Will I reincarnate?

My twin-to-be glares me down as she's wounded into the womb prison, a wind blaze in our faces, pushing us back. The sky-clock gradually lapses to full moon, gradually transitioning into crescent dilation as we transit from District to Cervix.

The act of breathing is a suffocating procedure, the entirety of the world pressing in from both sides, slowing my limbs into a crawl—snail's pace.

The muscles, bones of sky, dense with resistance leak the sunset. Latent phase near.

Our veil transcends into a living dark, the womb of darkness. Lightning appears, burning an orifice into the sky. It's a slit that becomes the uterus. Pulsating, pulsating, pulsating—glittering, a flash of star. Billows of cloud drip like thick mucus membranes onto grasslands. A storm that lasts hours. Then, thunder, contractions. The moon wanes and waxes, a cervical dilation, water breaks in rain patters.

The sky-slit usually opens like clockwork after three sun-bleeds, sometimes irregular, bleeding things into our land. Then, stars will skim back and forth, stitching the opening in the sky, mother earth's healing, mother earth's rapture.

I don't know where I am currently. I am a being freed of flesh. I am sight without bone, without structure. In this terrain, ethnicity soaks our skins desert-brown. We stare at each other, a land mass, separated by gender, its face a structure of nothing.

And in the kgotla, in the bleeding of the night, a ritual is made: a cow wails through the night, its life leaking for the ritual, its cry a veneration. Their ritual is almost done, and so is ours.

There are parts of me, tangible parts that weren't present before, like the top-most part of me entering/leaving a new environment. A tightening lowers itself into my chest. How does one lose his gender, the identity of his physio-travels in this world? What does it mean to live without gender? Is it a sexless life? A gender is what the eye of society licks itself across your body. The sex is the thing that remains intact, nameless and shuddered against your thighs trying to figure out who and what it is: you could imagine the two of us, attached to this soul-shell, separate and at one. I, the charger of this body. It, the charger of me, at times. We are dressed differently. I am in cloths lush to skin. My gender has no name. I have no name. I search for it, searching for myself. We are born choosing where we fall. Mine was taken from me. It is a passport in this realm, so neon in your face. In the olden days, all you did was hide beneath cloth, mask that face with shadow of doubt.

They did say everything would feel like pain—stimulation, sound, temperature—but pain is a cloak covering my bones, a material, thin and brown.

A tunnel wraps warm around me, tensing, convulsing—I try to seek breath, to seek life, and pain strikes me, giving me voice; a cry, a breath. I am here.

A blurry bloodied woman leans over, huffing, and voice warm as cloth: “Is it a boy or a girl?”

I am gone, I am going, but I am here too.

I am born who I am.

Glossary

Kaosane: tomorrow

mathoa: ankle rattle.....

mokuru: traditional beer

plek: place.....