

FOR WHAT ARE
BUTTERFLIES
WITHOUT THEIR
WINGS

PROPERTY OF MARGO BOOKS

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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SHORT STORIES

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MASOBE

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This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places and incidents portrayed are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design Oriahi Ofuzim Anderson

To Grace and Joy,
whose stories coloured my childhood.

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“Last night I saw a butterfly
break darkness with the colours of her wings,
she rose gently to the moon with songs
within her body.”

– Romeo Oriogun, *The Origin of Butterflies*

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THE TRANSFIGURATION

I am thinking of how to tell my mother that she is a bad woman; that she did not raise me well. The woman with a bleached face and knuckles blacker than the tip of a quill told me so.

“The matters of a husband and wife you leave to them. You don’t interfere. Didn’t your mother teach you that? Go tell her to raise you again. No wonder you behave like a woman. Mscheeeew!”

She yelled from the window of her apartment which is right above mine. Apartment 4B. I had gone to save her from her husband’s daily beating. Despite all that pounding, the woman didn’t want me to intervene. You don’t save someone who doesn’t want to be saved, mother used to say.

I sit, pen in hand. My palms are sweaty. As my trembling hand presses the pen against the paper, my life cascades before me. Flashes of blurred sepia-toned images. A silent film of my twenty-eight years on earth. Silent but with colour. A silent horror movie. My anguish stares wide at me like the green-eyed owl that hoots in the dark back alley.

“Dear Mother,

I hope this letter finds you well (*this is the part I lie that I am concerned for her welfare*) I would have written sooner, I know I should, but I have been too busy (*Another lie, then I go on to ask her how life back home is and if Uncle X is still alive and if Aunt Y finally gave birth*). Anyway, I was just writing to tell you that the woman who lives in apartment 4B told me that my mother didn't raise me well. I think it's true...”

Too harsh. She will be devastated. I know her. She will slap her thighs and weep her heart out. I crumple the piece of paper into a small ball with ink smudges.

I will call her instead.

Beep.

Her voice cackles on the other end.

“Hello Mother...”

“Hello, who is this?”

Has my voice changed so much? Maybe the medicine is working after all.

“This is Roda...I mean Roni, your son.”

“Why do you speak like a woman now?”

“Because I am a woman now. Well, I am becoming a woman. But that's not why I

called...No, stop crying mother. Okay?
The woman from apartment 4B told me
you didn't raise me well. I think she's
saying the truth...No. It's not God's fault
this time. It's yours."

At this point she breaks down. All I hear is sobbing on
the other end. My network provider tells me I don't
have any more airtime. Bloody conglomerates. Can't
they let a mother weep over her child's tribulations?

My cell phone buzzes and I wake up to a blue
flashing screen. I have a missed call Mzamodo. A text
message from him too, *If you come late, I will not give you
the drugs. Sikufichi.* I know he's not lying. I leap up and
head for the bus station.



Machakos Country Bus station on a Sunday afternoon
is Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. The sun, a large fiery ball
emitting yellowy spikes, scorches our foreheads. The
stupefying heat saps humidity from the earth, leaving
red gusts of fine dust floating in the air. Touts shout
atop their voices beneath the sun's oppressive glare.
Hawkers chant the names of their wares in glorious
melody. The hooting of the buses rises above the
human noises and drowns them. I have sat in this stuffy-
like-a-coffin Dandora-bound matatu for about an hour

now. There seems to be no sign of it filling up. I flap my hand close to my face and pull my dress away from my body to allow air to circulate and cool off; I have nothing underneath. I glance at the wrist watch. If I sit here any longer, I will be late. Mzamodo doesn't like me being late.

I make my way from the back of the matatu, and walk past rows of empty seats with chapped old covers. An afro-beat song, with the words 'prokoto' and 'chocolate city' being repeated over and over again, blares from the large black speakers mounted on the roof of the bus. A young man, of about seventeen or nineteen, stands at the door and shouts, "Dandora hamsini! Dandora fifty bob!" He sees me alight and grabs my wrist. I quickly pull away from his grip. He retreats, presses his palms together as if in a prayer and beseeches, "Madam, tafadhali rudi ndani." I stare at him for a while—hair shaved on both sides into a mohawk, Arsenal FC shirt stained with rings of sweat under the armpits, teeth discoloured to a dark shade of green from constant mastication of miraa, palms dusty from all the pounding of the bus panel—and get back into the empty bus. Why? I don't know. But maybe because he's the first person on the streets of Nairobi to call me 'Madam'.



The narrow paths that intertwine inside Dandora lead me past shanties made of wood and paper board patching on their walls. Water from a burst sewer pipe gushes into the road. Litter is strewn along the paths and carried down by the sewer water to the houses that sit on the lower side of the uneven topography. Women stand in groups of about seven to ten. From the echo of their empty laughter, I know they are exchanging gossip. To their left is the Dandora Pentecostal Church. They must be coming from choir practice. Children of school-age run around in tattered clothes that leave their buttocks bare for the dust and the scorching sun to do with as they please.

Mzamodo's house comes into view; a lone shack that stands away from the rest of the shanties like it's saying 'I don't belong with the rest of you'. His shack is different from the rest—wooden door, tin roof and brick walls. Almost a proper house except for the way the bricks are layered; as if someone threw them into a pile that became a house. A large shiny solex padlock rests on the lock from outside. I knock on the door. A female voice inside the house asks,

"Ni nani?" When I tell her to open, she responds that Mzamodo is away on a trip to Zanzibar; he won't be back till Friday, three weeks from now.

Phone in hand, I dial Mzamodo's number. I hear the phone ring inside the house. At the same time, the

bed creaks with the sudden leap of someone heavy. That must be him. The door is flung open. There on the other end, in a vest and towel around his waist, stands the first man I know capable of teleporting.

“Why do you do that?”

I am sitting on the edge of Mzamodo’s bed. Sheets and blankets all ruffled up in a pile on the low wooden bed. A young girl lies naked with her hand propping her head, popping gum and staring at the ceiling. She is unperturbed by my presence. She doesn’t pull the faded maroon sheets over her body to cover her nudity. Her breasts are large and full like a grown woman’s; she’s an early bloomer. I stare at them and say to myself: *God I wish I could have such beautiful breasts.* A sudden feeling of shame washes over me for my being envious of the girl’s breasts. I stop staring at her chest and instead stare at the wall directly opposite. The paint has peeled off the walls revealing the initial coat—an obnoxious grey that oozes morbidity. They did not wait for the first coat to dry.

Mzamodo still stands at the door where I edged past him. His vest, once white, has taken on a new colour somewhere between cream and brown and is jagged around the edges with cigarette holes in it. Despite paying to have sex with children and being a chain smoker, I still consider him a good man. He’s the only true friend I have in this city. He’s the only one