



## Between the flowers and the filth

Wendy Okoke

In the middle of the End SARs protest

We get out of the bathroom. Smoke hanging tightly to our hair. They outpour into your cold room, a revival.

Ten days before I met you again, smoking was an isolation game. No win or lose.

Two years before we fell apart, it was a ritual and sometimes a revelation.

Today, sitting next to you, hands clasped under the soft soddened bench. Bullets run loose, piercing the dark October. Your fingers whisper against the hair on my skin.

Let's take this inside. Tonight's game is to the death. I am learning a new trick. I hear everything you say in an old Lauryn Hill tune.

Knowing all the ways my body replies when you speak. This is how I know. Today is a win. The room swelled in the scent of wet pine and lost children.

We, dazed by the euphoria of longing and fucking. Our hands, do not know where to settle. Much like the protesters. We do not have our fists in the air.

Elbows hanging, l-shaped carrying their weight. We settle them, arcs around each other. We are aching through our fear.

Our silence sits in our mouth breaks abruptly, and scatters itself. Your lips unmask their tremors. If there was ever a time to sing your favorite song, it is now.

I have never asked you what it is. No one will find us here. Safe, I say. Deep in our filth.

They'll need to soil themselves to find us.

Your face, burrows into mine, firm, and holds it before you. I can't look at you long enough for you to catch my eye.

Every time I catch mine in yours, there is hunger. I am always starving. And you hear this rumble, loud.

*Quiet down, they might hear us.*

Journey mercies

Today, I cut myself open again.

Bleeding into the lines, carved in the sharp corners of the tiles.

This is just another place I have forced my body to stay.

Stray, a loose definition for a thing looking to be found.

Say, no man born of a woman can hurt me.

That Ala is still forming me in her womb, and

I regenerate as much as I break.

That soon I will carry myself to my place.

Not where I was spat out, not where I was nailed to.

Not where I first started gardening, not even here.

Seedlings sprout failed to bloom.

Not in my country.

Not in this country.

Petals wilting on broken dreams, its echo.

A sonorous elegy.

Not a place I have been, not a place I know.

I have always been one leg in.

I cannot commit to a thing I cannot fight for.

And I am saving my fights.

For my rightful place.

Searching for an orange city

In the middle of the journey something that looks like death

stood waiting. I, obedient. Always to the worst things.

Here, I will bury what is left. Inside those men. Purpose, a non-functional delight.

Inside their skins. I am taking my power.

In the wrong hands. I am nothing. They mould me and I bend so easily.

There are no lost girls in the orange city. No broken girls. No running girls.

No girl invisible. At the T junction. Another awaits, like a second coming.

I, pause and shake the dust off my feet. A hunch on my back.

Gravid with excitement. Everything I want to unload. War in my body.

In my father's house. In Nigeria. In my love's arms. At the gate. I fall.

Body, shaking from towing weights up a hill. Crushing under its own deceit. All the ways it is attracted to its own destruction. Mine, womanhood, fore bearer of sin and desire.

It took 100 rolls of cigarettes, 35 men, 205 bottles of wine, 15 women.

14 days in hospital beds, 5 blackouts, 2 deaths, the entire season of girlfriends.

To put 4 years in 2 suitcases. Even then, my face, not fully formed. Or perfect like my mother's. I place my head on her breasts. Lean into the grace of her cuddled joy.

My orange city, tender and acquainted against my sore head. She nestles my head onto her fully sculpted thighs. Soft stroking my hair.

My name, musical on her lips. Each syllable, a prayer docking on my skin.

Welcome home, Nnem.