

Names

'We are nameless, and all names are ours.'

– EMMANUEL LACABA

My mother's name is Rosana, but when she left,
I had other mothers. Rowena, Jimboy, Alma.

I was named after
the first syllables of my parents;
I will always have them with me.

My mother says not all names have meaning –
Riverside. Manila. London. Kurba.

And someday I will forget
all the commands I did not heed –
like the time I did not spin the plate clockwise
before my father left for work
even if it would deliver him from accidents.

Not all destinations are found
in the junctions of your palm lines.
Say better life, say better life.

And God knows I am repenting.

Say airbus-something, say one-way ticket,
keep following the sunset. Clouds
are the closest things to my mother.

Say United Kingdom, say the queen, NHS.
Does winter always mean —

?

Listen – can you hear it? The loneliness
of stretchers along A&E corridors.

And the strongest part of me
is the scar I hide underneath my fringe.

My mother
hides in the staff toilet
to make long-distance calls.

Someday I will realise
the woman lonely in her mansion
is not my mother
but a future version of myself.
I will chop bitter gourds
on the galaxy-glimmer
of her worktop.

*Shall we shorten your name on your nametag
so it's easier to remember? Say Yes please, Sister.*

Say Please, Sister, can I take this call?

Say Arnold, Marcus, Harold. Say septicaemia, alcohol
poisoning, hernia.

Say Jason, Darius, Vernon. Say cancer, myocardial
infarction, query schizophrenia.

Hides in the toilet.

And I have the first syllables
of my parents' names,
that is why I am not scared.

A boy sticks out his tongue
and says I do not have a mother.
I punch him in the face. The sanctity of blood.

I am not scared.

Because my mother has followed the sunset,
because she has burnt her lips on mash and gravy
in a three-minute lunch break.
Because she calls me *Anak* – my child, my baby.
She asks, What do you want for Christmas? for your
birthday?

1990 remains stuck on the other line.
Say Please, Sister, can I take this call?

My breasts blossom,
she can call me only by my name.

I have the first syllables of my parents' names,
that is why I am not scared.

I can trek the mountain of Makulot,
my father's rifle hanging from my back.

I can carry myself
not how someone carries
a cytotoxic drug
but how my mother hooks
with her finger, a drain bottle
with blood clots the weight
of gemstones.