

The Mender of broken soles
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The time he came to us our land had been without rain for many, many years. Indeed, there were many among us who had known nothing but years of drought from the time we had been born. There were others, of course, who vaguely remembered days of abundant rain, when birds still sang in the trees. But such reminiscences were nothing more than nostalgic ramblings of old men and women for many of us. We were not, as you might have thought, heartened when he appeared saying he possessed the gift to make rain fall. The truth of the matter is that when he announced his arrival with the hauntingly sweet melodies of his mbira playing we became agitated. We had grown accustomed to the long dry spells, the rotting bones in the planes and the deathly silence that filled the air. Besides, everyone knew that the Mambo of the land had banned all forms of music and merry making. But that music, conjured up by his fingers from the metal keys...

"I am a rainmaker in the land where I come from," he said.

There was a whole generation among our people that had never heard of music in their entire lives, or witnessed the miracle of a rain making ceremony. All they knew was that we got water out of the benevolence of the Mambo. Why, everyone knew that whatever thoughts we had, and dreams too, were from the good heart of our revered leader.

We looked at him askance.

"Are you the king of the land from whence you come, then?" we enquired of him.

"No," he said, "for there is another who holds that title. I am but a simple man who happens to possess the gift of music and the power to ask the Creator to open up the heavens and send forth rain that heals the land."

We thought he was mad.

"How is that possible not to be the king and possess such powers?" someone asked.

"It is the Creator's wish, for gifts are distributed accordingly and justly to one and all," he replied.

We had never heard such blasphemous words before. Nor had we seen such a man as he. He was tall, lanky man with white dreadlocks that cascaded to his shoulders. His age was difficult to determine for there were instances when he looked just as young as the youngest ones among us or as old as the oldest. He wore strange black clothes. He frightened us. We were also wary of him because our Mambo was known to send spies among us to ensnare those who harboured treacherous thoughts. There was nothing worse, the Mambo said, than a treasonous heart and of all sins, he abhorred this the most. In fact we did not even know what exactly a treasonous heart was but that was besides the point, so we were always being warned about the dangers of having one. Some of the elders had hinted of days when seeds of discontent had flourished across the land, but the Mambo had reaped them out but that had been so long ago that many of us had no idea what sort of seeds these were and what sort of plants they flowered into.

All we knew was that we had the most benevolent Mambo who had ever lived. He loved us so much that babies were taught how to be silent, for wailing could be deemed as a form of music. They were told the gruesome murders that had been perpetrated by our Leader in the past, for our own good. Such cruelty had been forced upon the Mambo. His palace was adorned by the heads of all those who had dared to sing their own songs in the past, and to dream their own dreams, as a reminder to those of us who might dare to do the same in the present. When one night our beloved Mambo had sent all his best sorcerers to collect dreams from our souls while we slept, we had been eternally grateful for the act of being relieved from such a burden as cherishing dreams of our own.

Now here was this strange man with the flowing tussled hair that the old men in our midst said reminded them of lion kings of yore that had once roamed the land before the Mambo became the one and only lion and king we knew. This stranger was actually playing music and talking of the gift with the power to summon rain. It was obvious that he was new to our land and he had not heard of how our one and only much loved Mambo had magical horns that had the power to gore out an individual's soul. Ours was probably the only land across the entire breadth of the earth where the birds had learnt to sing in sign language for fear that their sweet songs might incur the wrath of our almighty ruler.

The elders wistfully spoke, once in a while of the erstwhile drum and rattle- *ngoma nebosho*- the heart of what they called our music. That had all been banned, of course. Mambo had ordered his *mauto* to come into our houses and bore holes into the taut hides of the *ngoma*, and throw away all our *bosho* into the bonfires which lit the night skies so that the glory of his vanity was visible for all to see far and wide. *Boorangoma*, we called him- the one who destroyed the drum- but once that name became common knowledge it too became taboo.

"But how can one ban the music of the people, the very soul of their lives?" asked the mbira player, perplexed when we told him about the laws that bound us and made us, Mambo's people, the happiest subjects across the earth.

"But that's the natural scheme of things," we told him.

"No it's not natural for people not to have songs, or for a land not to be nourished by fecund rains," he said.

"Here, it's as natural as the rising sun, just as it is natural for you to lose your head over these things of which you speak."

"I have never come across a land such as this," he said, shaking his white mane of dreadlocks sadly. He twirled a strand of hair in agitation. In that moment he looked ancient, as old as the granite balancing rocks that dotted our land. He took a *nbekwe*, out of his *nbava* and tilted some snuff onto his palm. He sneezed three times after he had taken the snuff which he was quiet clearly fond of. He looked thoughtfully across the desolate land.

"This is the nature of our land and it has been like this for as long as most of us can remember," we told him. "It's safe and secure as long as things remain the way they are."

"I would rather be unsafe and insecure as long as I can enjoy the beauty of my music, and the pleasure of the rain drumming on the earth like the ancients songs of time itself," he said quietly.

“Ah,” we said to him, fear in our eyes, “it’s folly to speak of such things and to speak of them among us is to invite death.”

“I cannot understand why you allow yourselves to live with such dread in your hearts everyday. But for your sake, I shall not be known as a rainmaker as long as I am I among you. You will find me at your market place, where many come to sell their wares, make and repair things. There I will mend the soles of your *shangu*, for I am also a gifted maker of shoes and mender of broken soles.”

Thus it came to pass that he stayed in our midst and gained a reputation for his ability to mend broken soles of all types. And it was by that craft and name that we came to know and call him, The Mender of Broken Soles. We sought his services, and even when we did not have shoes that needed mending, we went to him anyway, for we loved the stories he told, as he sat under the shade of an ancient baobab tree that stood in the centre of the market place.

“The footprints we leave on the earth can tell us a lot about who we are,” he told us as his powerful hands dexterously sewed together the broken soles people brought to him.

“How is that?” we asked, for we were invariably drawn to him. It was as if his personality was a shimmering pool of water where we all sought to quench our thirst in that land of drought that was ours. There were times it appeared as if a radiant light glowed around him, flowing from his white dreadlocked mane. So always we sought him. There was nothing for us to do anyway, for the land was so hard and sterile, that many of us had given up the pretence of trying to eke a living out of the soil.

“The heaviness of the way we tread on the earth reflects the nature of the load that we carry in our souls,” he explained, stopping his mending so that he could take some of his snuff. He continued, “There are those who tread lightly and softly on the earth, for their souls have wings and they are not bound by the worries and cares of this earth. Their lightness of being allows their souls to soar across open skies their feet touching the ground, but not bound by it.” We listened, mesmerised. It was as if the things that the elders tried to remember but came in fragmented bits and pieces had finally been embodied in The Mender of Broken Soles. The tales the old men and women tried to recapture and retell but faded away like wisps off smoke gained life and colour in the hands of the mender. He continued,

“Then there are those, like many in this land, who tread heavily and fearfully on the earth, bound to it, their souls chained to the ground by fears and unshed tears.”

We shifted uneasily. He always talked of these things that he called the prisons of the soul.

“But what have we to fear, or shed tears over, when we have our beloved Mambo?” we asked him

He simply smiled wryly and said,

“Now look at the sole of this *shangu*, it has hole right in the middle and I can only assume that its owner suffered a grave loss only recently.

There was a gasp of both pain and surprise.

“But that’s true. I lost my youngest child whose frail frame was consumed by the ravages of hunger for we could no longer feed him, for nothing grows here anymore and so the earth took pity on us and claimed him back,” the owner of the shoe explained.

The Mender of Broken Soles nodded. We saw a tear roll out of his right eye and fall right smack in the middle of the sole he was mending.

“That is always the case of soles that have holes right in their heart. I have been mending many of those since I came here. What can I give you for the pain in your heart? I can hear its grieving calling out for balm to soothe its ache even as I sit here. I am not sure if even I can cure such broken pieces.”

“Surely something to cure it completely would be ideal, sole mender.”

“That might be so, but all true healing comes from within. A healer can only assist. There are some soles, for example I cannot mend. You cannot heal that which does not want to be healed. I know that you are not permitted the gift of music here, but I will play you a song once I have finished mending this sole with a hole in the middle”

And so as we sat at his feet, in a crescent moon under the ancient tree, we heard him play an old song about loss and pain and ultimately redemption. It was called *Vana Vangu*. (*O My Poor Children*) He sang *Vana vangu kani/ Ndanga ndichiti ndimi magarika/ Hanga ndimi munayo nhamo* (O, my poor children/ I thought you had found peace/ But alas you know nothing but trouble). *Vana vanguwe/ Ndanga ndichiti ndimi makagarikawo/ Hanga ndimi munawo huranda* (O, my poor children/ I thought your existence was filled with abundance?but, alas, you only mere slaves). We looked fearfully over our shoulders but the strains of the mbira keys that cascaded one over the other falling and rising, interlocking and interweaving like waterfalls, so the eldest among who still remembered said, captivated us with their hauntingly sweet melodies. Ordinarily we would have fled in fear that the dreaded *manto* might come to stop the disturbance. Everyone had been taught that music disturbed the peace and tranquillity of the land. Even those who had never heard music before had been taught this. But hearing it now, O, how to describe the tingling in the soles of our feet, the warmth in our bellies, the startling explosion of unnamed sensations in our minds?

One day he told us a little story that he had heard of in one of his numerous travels, about a little bird. *Once upon a time, he said there was a farmer who was walking towards his fields. It was a cold morning. As he walked, the farmer heard the crying of a bird. It was obviously in pain. He followed the sounds and sure enough, he came across a small bird which was literally frozen by the morning dew. The farmer realised that if he left where it was and in that condition it would certainly die. It so happened that one of his cattle had passed dung. It was still very fresh, exuding hot steam in the morning mist. Aha, thought the farmer, I know what to do. He bent down and picked up the dung. Gently he wrapped it around the bird so that the warm dung would warm it up and keep it safe until the sun had risen. He tenderly put the little bird down behind a bush, hoping to come and release it on his return journey home. He merrily went on his way.*

A second farmer came along. He too, was on his way to the fields. He heard the cry of a bird in obvious distress. He followed the sounds and came across a little bird cocooned in dung. Huh, some people are cruel, he thought. How can they be so mean as to trap such a harmless little bird like this? He clicked his tongue bitterly. I know what to do, he said, I will take the little fellow out of his misery. He picked up the little bird and deftly wrung its neck. It died instantly.

There was a buzz of shock and horror.

“But how could he do something as mean as that?” we asked.

“Was it mean? He thought he was doing the bird a favour.”

“No, the first farmer did the bird a favour because he wanted it to live. He gave the bird the gift of life, while the second one brought only death.”

“But surely both farmers had nothing but noble intentions? What do you think the morale of the story is then?”

“That you should not go about wringing the necks of birds you find trapped in dung,” we said.

He smiled- a beautiful sight that spoke of sights and secrets that we could not imagine. We had forgotten how to do that, smile, but it was a pleasant sight all the same.

“You think so. Well the man from whom I heard that story was a *muzungu*.”

We gasped. We heard stories of these strange beings whom the eldest said looked like people whose skin had been peeled off for it was so light. The elders who still remembered said that they had once lived among us, and even ruled, but our Mambo had freed us from their tyranny and driven them out of our land back across a great water beyond, from whence they had come. Many of us had never seen them and from the stories the Mambo told of their greed and cruelty, we were glad that he had saved us from such a plight. Now the Mender of Broken Soles was telling us that he had met such beings and even traded stories with them! Was there no end to his blasphemous ways? But we were intrigued.

“The *muzungu* told me, for they can be as crude as they are eloquent in speech, that the moral of this story is very simple and it is that not everyone who puts you in shit is your enemy and not everyone who takes you out of shit is your friend.”

He burst out laughing and winked at us. It was infectious and we burst out laughing too. Then what we had done dawned on us. We looked at one another stunned. Very few remembered when that had last been done in our midst. The thrill and pleasure of laughter rediscovered. We looked guiltily over our shoulders.

As the days went by, the number of those who came to sit at the foot of the baobab tree grew. The crescent moon became full and the Mender of the Broken Soles was part of the circle as we were all part of it.

“All shoes are made to fit. They should be made to fit. A size too small or too big, then they become uncomfortable. If you constrict your soles then misery will be your bane.”

“What of those of us who do not have shoes?”

“You have feet and so must you take care of them for they are a priced possession, particularly the soles. Take great care of the soles of your feet, and they will take good care of you. Do not wait for someone else to come and tell you how to take care of your soles,” he said.

That day, he told us another story.

Once upon a time the Creator was walking on the face of the earth. Two farmers who were neighbours and were out on a walk came across the Creator. Please, O Supreme Being, the two beseeched, since you are down here, can you tell us what our future holds for us?

The Creator sighed but was used to the whims of humankind always wanting to know what was to be as long as it favourable. The Creator looked at the first farmer and said, your harvest shall be

increased seven fold, and you shall be blessed with a life of luxury and abundance. The first farmer's face lit up with joy. The second farmer was told, as for you, you shall know nothing but misery and what you have shall dwindle until you die in abject poverty.

After that the Creator vanished. The first farmer was feeling rather smug. He could not help but grin at his friend mockingly as he took pleasure from what he had been told and the knowledge that the other would not have such a blessing.. The second farmer was quiet and thoughtful throughout the remainder of their journey. When they arrived at their respective farms, the first farmer built himself a splendid gazebo where he strung up a hammock. From sunrise until sunset he lay in his hammock, a smug smile on his lips as he waited for his harvest to multiply sevenfold. Indeed, when the skies were clear, the night bathed by the light of the stars and the moonlight, the farmer would lie in his hammock all night long, waiting, waiting and waiting...

The second farmer meditated for a long time about what he had heard. He mused long and hard and in the end asked, why? What have I done to deserve such a curse, why should everything I have dwindle? No, with my hands I shall turn the curse into a gift, he resolved. So it came to pass, that everyday he rose before the crack of dawn, as long as there was moonlight to help him see as he went about with his work in the fields. He only left the field when it was too dark for him to see what he was doing. Day in and day out he went about his back-breaking chores. He repaired all the broken fences, leaking roofs and rebuilt everything that had broken down. His hands and his love of work were his solace.

In the meantime, his friend, the first farmer, smiled pitifully at his neighbour. Poor fool, he thought as he lay in his hammock. Why do you bother? he asked his friend. You know what has been decreed, you are wasting your time. But the second farmer paid him no heed. The first farmer smiled sarcastically put his hands under his head and waited... His homestead began to slowly fall apart. His land became overgrown from neglect. The food he had stored in his granaries began to run out. By the end of the seventh year, the first farmer had become reed thin and as derelict looking as his farm. He was still waiting

The second farmer's lot, however, improved as all the hard work he had been putting into his farm began to pay off magnificently. He prospered many times more than the seven fold that had been predicted for the first farmer. The latter died painfully in his sleep from starvation, but when he died, he was still waiting... The second farmer bought all the land that his neighbour had left, which included seven huge tracts of land. Why, thought the second farmer, the abundance of my land has increased seven fold. He smiled all the way to work in his newfound fields of fortune.

We smiled.

"No matter the prophecy, or promise, if you give up the power to do things yourself, nothing will come to pass," said The Mender of Broken Soles.

It was in this way that he awakened something inside us. There were those among us whose rusty memories whose flames we thought had long gone out were slowly rekindled like the embers beneath cold ash that had not quite gone out. But we could not light the huge fires they promised, and the flames fluttered in the canyons of minds which had become accustomed to the emptiness of suppression. In time it was not only people from our village who came to watch and listen as The Mender of Broken Soles wove magic with his fingers and tongue.

"When you have sturdy soles, you trust them and walk anywhere even in the dark without fear of unseen thorns or pits. Fear of the dark, things unknown and unseen can paralyse the soles of your feet and you will not be able to go anywhere, particularly somewhere where you need to be," he told us.

We were enchanted.

“As a young boy, my grandmother used to tell us folk tales as we sat around the fire in the dry season. Once upon a time, I am sure, in this land, you once told folktales, too,” he told us. A memory stirred. A fire burned in the distant mists of time. A circle was glimpsed. But how long ago had that been? That day he told us what he said was a common folktale elsewhere but which we had forgotten and some had never heard of at all. It was about the terror Zizi, the owl, had caused in the entire animal kingdom.

A long time ago, Zizi was the king of the jungle. He ruled the entire animal kingdom with a heavy hand and a dark heart. He was a lazy hunter, so he enjoyed sending all the other animals and birds to bring him food and water. It was so much easier than doing the hard work all by himself. The other animals and birds were terrified because Zizi had claimed to have horns. They could see them jutting from either side of his head. So no one wanted to be gored to death.

Then, one day, Nhengure, the smallest bird in the entire kingdom, who had been away for many years in far away strange lands returned. He was shocked to find his friends and relatives living in such abject poverty and terror while Zizi lived a life of ease and comfort.

“But why do you allow him to do this to you?” Nhengure asked in exasperation.

“Why, because he is our king,” they said simply.

“But why is he your king?”

“That’s the way things are.”

“But why are things the way they are?”

“Because he declares them so.”

“Owl is only a bird like all of us.”

The other animals and birds were stunned.

“Blasphemy! Zizi is like no other bird, for he is the only bird with horns.”

“What?!!! That’s the most preposterous thing I have ever heard,” laughed Nhengure, tears of merriment gushing out of his eyes.

The others were horrified. They looked around furtively.

“Hush, now, you have been away for far too long. He has many spies around here, and what you have been asking and saying will no doubt have reached him by now. It’s certain death.”

“Ridiculous. I am not afraid of a mere owl or his so-called horns.”

There was great consternation and soon Nhengure was left all alone as the others fled from him, afraid that Mighty Owl’s wrath would fall upon them too.

That night Zizi soldiers came for Nhengure. He was waiting for them. He did not resist or say anything. Zizi always judged offenders at night time.

“Well, well, so you are the silly little bird that has been saying all these nasty things I hear about, are you? It’s simply not bird like for you, to denigrate the office of the king the way you do!” fumed Zizi.

“Nor is it bird like for you to lie to your subjects, O wise and learned owl” said Nhengure mockingly. There was shocked silence. It was taboo to speak back to the king. He did all the talking for he was wiser and more learned than all the brains of the animal kingdom put together.

“Silence!” shouted Zizi, outraged. “Who gave you permission to speak?”

“One who possesses the gift of speech from the almighty maker of the universe needs no permission to speak.”

“Shut up! You have gone too far. Off with his head!”

"Why don't you gore me first, O wise and learned king, for I have heard so much about these potent horns of yours."

There was a stunned and expectant silence. No one had actually seen Zizi gore anyone to death, but the bloody nature of the outcome was legendary. They waited and waited, but Zizi seemed to have become frozen on his throne. He stared at Nhengure. Nhengure was such a tiny bird compared to him for he had grown bigger and rotund from all the food he had been gorging himself with over the years. Nhengure walked straight to the owl and exposed his little breast.

"Here, go ahead, gore me."

Zizi was quite clearly livid but he did not do anything. A murmur swept through the gathering. They waited for Nhengure to get his comeuppance. But, instead, Nhengure did the unthinkable. He reached out and touched the owl's horns. There were screams of terror, for it was said that anyone who dared to touch any part of Zizi at all would be immediately struck down by a bolt of lightning. An expectant hush fell upon the gathering. Nothing happened. Instead Nhengure began to play with the owl's horns, fluffing them around. And still no bolt of lightning came from the sky, nor was the little bird gored to death by the legendary ferocious horns.

"These, my friends," laughed Nhengure, "are not horns. They are nothing but ears."

There were gasps of surprise which turned into angry murmurs as one by one they came to feel the horns they had lived in dread of for all these years. Tears of humiliation rolled down the owl's eyes.

"Let us wring his neck!"

They did, but before they could kill him, Nhengure asked them to stop.

"No do not kill him. Let him, instead, suffer a fate worse than death."

"What can possibly be worse than death?"

"Life. Let him live among us with the knowledge that the truth about him is finally out. Look, you have also already crippled him, for from now onwards he can turn his head right round so that he can be able to see all those he has been lying to for all these years."

Thus was the owl's life spared. Even up to this day, his head can swivel round almost a complete circle on his neck., but he no longer walks in the day light, preferring to hunt at night when all the other animals have gone to sleep, because even to this day he still carries his shame in his heart.

It was news of that story that finally made the king mad with rage. That night, Mambo's *mauto* came for our beloved storyteller and mbira player who had mended the broken soles as he sat under the baobab tree. They kicked down our doors, and poured the little mealie- meal we had onto the ground, mixing it with the dirt of the earth.

"Let's see if you can eat your stories and mbira music," they mocked.

Then they force marched us to Mambo's palace. They beat us thoroughly until even old men and women were urinating on themselves and begging for mercy.

"You are traitors, all of you," bellowed Mambo scowling at us. "And all traitors deserve nothing but death. I shall hang this traitor who has been staying in your midst while all of you watch. What do you have to say, old man?"

"What can I say? All I did was to tell stories. All I sought was to mend broken soles. All I ever wanted was to play mbira music. If I must hang for cherishing music and stories, then hang I must, for your word is law here," said The Mender of Broken Soles softly but everyone heard him clearly.

“You have disdained to break that law, my word, my world. You brought this abominable instrument into the heart of my land. Your stories have dared to challenge my status as the only story teller in this kingdom. You have dared to plant seeds of discontent among my subjects for your stories inspire dreams. I am the sole maker and giver of dreams here!” bellowed Mambo

“It’s a privilege, you have no doubt earned due to your unparalleled wisdom. But I assure you, you have nothing to fear from stories and music or the dreams of others other than your own.”

“How dare you speak back to me? Hold your tongue. I am afraid of nothing and even fear itself fears me. I fought to free this land, and by taking away the power to dream for my people I gave saved from the tyranny of false hopes, promises and dreams. I am their saviour and you are nothing but a snake in our midst, whose head has to be crushed once and for all. Hang this man from the very baobab tree where he told his stories!”

Mambo had spoken. That night The Mender of Broken Soles was led to the tree under whose shade he had shed tears as he mended soles with holes in the middle.

“My people, you have let me down by daring to listen to this man,” said the Mambo. “You were not vigilant enough and allowed yourselves to be deceived by the false sweetness of his melodies. But fear not, my children, for I am here to save you yet again.”

The Mender of Broken Soles asked for one special request. The soldiers looked at him and said gruffly, “What can a man already dead wish for?”

“Grant him his last wish,” said Mambo benevolently.
The mender of Broken Soles asked for his *nhekwe*.

“If I am to leave the land where my forefathers once walked, allow me to take the snuff they left me one last time so that I can open the path that will lead to their land,” he said.

Mambo nodded. The soldiers shrugged. They gave the Mender of Broken Soles his *nhekwe* and he took a pinch and dragged lovingly through his nostrils, eyes shut in ecstasy.

“If I hold on to this, you will not be able to kill me.”
Mambo froze. The soldiers were alarmed. One of them lunged at The Mender of Broken Soles angrily. But to our amazement all we saw was the soldier falling into a deep pool that had appeared mysteriously where a moment before The Mender of Broken Soles had stood. Then just as suddenly he materialised standing there again, smiling. He dropped a pinch of snuff onto the earth and behold there was blanket of mist covering the baobab tree and the soldiers could be heard stumbling and cursing about blindly.

The mist disappeared.

“I came here to die so that I could live. I will allow you to kill me so that life can return to this land again, for that is part of my destiny. What you kill today is my body, but there is something else that no man can touch or kill.”

The Mambo was terrified.

“Hang him!” he screamed.

The soldiers tried three times, but The Mender of Broken Soles did not die. He smiled one last time, looked at us and the sight of his white mane cascading onto his black attire was magnificent. For a moment he appeared to be suspended in midair flying up the baobab tree to the heavens above. He beckoned to me.

“Take this,” he said quietly.

And so it was that The Mender of Broken Soles passed his *nhekwe* on to me. I hid it underneath my garments, for there were among us those who heard begun to wear attire akin to that of our beloved story teller. He looked straight at us, smiled and said,

“Never let the gift of stories and songs die.”

Then a shadow fell across the moon. It became crimson red before our very eyes. We had never seen anything like it. Then a dark clouds covered the sky. A strong wind began to howl. Then in the first time in years, it began to rain. In the darkness, in the wind and the rain, we melted away for we did not want to suffer the wrath of the king and his soldiers. But we were astounded. Walking in the wind and the rain we did not know whether to cry or laugh. Out in the distance, we heard the Mambo finally find his voice. He bellowed, “We shall deal with them tomorrow when this abomination has passed.”

They left the Mender of Broken Soles drifting in the wind and the rain under the baobab tree. When we were certain that the *mauto* had left, we went and took his body down. It was then that a plague of frogs appeared and started going to the palace. We, on the other hand, took the body to the mountains. We buried him in a cave. Throughout his wake, the rain fell. We kept vigil over his body for three days, telling stories and singing songs some that we had heard the Mender of Broken Soles sing as well as others that the old ones among us were somehow able to unearth from the banks of their memories. We partook of the snuff from his *nhekwe* which always seemed to be full. No *mauto* came from the palace to take us for our punishment.

It was as we danced and sang that we saw each other for who and what we really were. The people decided to call me Nyanduri. A woman whose dancing was a delight to behold was named Jikinya, and so on. After three days we knew what we had to do. We would march to the palace so that Mambo could punish us as he wished. We walked, telling stories, and singing songs old and new, for there were many among us who had been born with gifts for making such things, which we discovered much to our joy. It was as if the three days of rain had cleansed us and made our spirits fresh and fecund. Lo and behold, one of the old ones among us actually remembered how to play the mbira, so we called him Gwentyambira. So as we walked towards what was certainly our deaths, we were actually merry.

As we were walking people from the other villages joined us and among them there was a woman who was pregnant. We named her Ratidzo, for was she not a sign? She refused to stay in the village saying that she wanted to be among us, even if it meant death for her and her unborn child. As we walked her pain became excessive and the old midwives told us that her time had come. The women stood in a circle around her, while all the men moved a short distance away and waited, singing songs and telling stories. Eventually we heard an ear splitting cry and we knew that a baby had been born. The first baby to cry in many years.

“Isn’t that the sweetest song you have ever heard?” someone said and we all laughed.

When a second wail came we looked at each other in wonder.

“*Mapatya!*” someone exclaimed in awe.

Yes, they were twins, a boy and a girl. We decided there and then that from that time onwards we would no longer kill twin- born children as had been our custom, for it was by no accident

that they had come to us soon after the Mender of Broken Soles had been taken from us. We would not wait for a week before they could be named as was our custom when naming a child, for because of the nature of our journey it was hardly likely that we were going to be around for another week.

“The boy shall be called Rusungunuko,” the exhausted Ratidzo declared, smiling wanly.

“And the girl shall be called Farai.”

We could not argue with her choice, for they were very apt names, Redemption and Happiness.

When we reached the palace we found that we could not enter the courtyard. It was overrun with frogs and, apparently, so too was the entire palace. Mambo stood by one of the windows, and we could see that he looked gaunt and haggard.

“Take them away. Make these damn creatures disappear and I will give you anything you want.”

It was only then that we realised our true power. We sat there for three days and three nights, singing our own songs and telling each other more stories to last us many lifetimes. This drove Mambo insane but he was powerless before our multitudes, for his *mauto* had deserted him with the coming of the frogs. We finally drove him out of the palace with our songs, stories laughter with he could not stand. He fled into the forest, the frogs on his heels and we never saw him again. Of his fabled magical horns with the power to gore souls, nothing was seen.

We dismantled his palace stone by stone and built a new great house of stone, with a massive enclosure of a courtyard where all the people from across the land could come to tell their stories, sing their songs and dance. After the wind and the rain, a new earth where life grew was born and it was a marvellous sight to behold. The beauty of flowers, trees and rivers running through the land of our fathers was poignant. We sang songs and told stories, celebrating the birth of this beauty and the life of the new born twins with every breath that was ours and had been from eternity and beyond. Many moons passed and we finally finished building the great house of stone and courtyard. The rains came.

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