

# A SEPARATION

I r y n T u s h a b e

Appeared in the literary/visual arts magazine *EXILE Quarterly*, Volume 41, No. 4  
[www.ExileQuarterly.com](http://www.ExileQuarterly.com)

This file contains 11 pages

On the evening before I leave for university in Canada, I sit on the terrace of my childhood home watching Kaaka, my grandmother, make lemongrass tea. She pounds cubes of sugarcane with a weathered pestle. She empties the pulp into a large pot and tops it up with rainwater from a jerry can the same olive-green as her A-shaped tunic.

I step down from my bamboo chair and stride over to her. I lift the heavy pot and set it on a charcoal stove smouldering with red-hot embers.

“Webare kahara kangye,” Kaaka thanks me in singsong Rukiga, the language of our birth. She comes from a generation of Bakiga who sing to people instead of talking because words, unlike music, can get lost.

I smile and sit back down in my creaky bamboo chair to read a copy of National Geographic that a British photographer sent me. His photograph of a troop of gorillas in my father’s wildlife sanctuary is on the cover of the magazine, and the accompanying article quotes me blaming the Ugandan government for refusing to support our conservation efforts.

“I hope I don’t get in trouble for this,” I say.

Kaaka laughs the sound of tumbling water. “You flatter yourself if you think the fierce leaders of our republic have time to read foreign magazines.”

She chops fresh lemongrass leaves on a tree stump, sniffing the bits in her hands before tossing them into the pan. The simmering infusion is already turning the light yellow colour of honey and will taste just as sweet. As the herb steeps, a citrusy fragrance curls into the evening like an offering. Kaaka fans the steam toward her nose and inhales noisily, closing her eyes to savour the aroma.

“The tea’s ready,” she says a short while later, rolling out a mat woven from dried palm fronds. She sits on it, legs outstretched, hands clasped in her lap. This is how it has always been with us. Kaaka makes the tea. I serve it.

I pull the sleeves of my oversized sweater over my fingers and lift the pan off the stove. With a ladle, I fill two mugs. I give Kaaka hers and sit down next to her, blowing on my cup before sucking hot tea into my mouth. Its sweetness has an edge.

“You’ll do very well in your studies overseas.” There is finality in her voice. When the invitation from the University of Regina’s Anthropology and Archaeology Department arrived months ago, I showed her saying I would go only if I had her blessing. “You’ll acquire some new knowledge and a whole world of wisdom.”

"I'll be home for Christmas," I tell her now.

"Yes, you will. Something to look forward to."

Three weeks later, I'm standing by my open living-room window looking down at the street, watching people go about the business of living. I arrived in Regina, Saskatchewan, on the tail end of summer. The August heat has turned my apartment into a sweltering cavern. Mr. Stevenson, the silver-haired professor who met me at the airport, will be supervising my doctoral research. He also found this Munroe Place apartment for me. I can't seem to say the street name right, though. Is it Monroe as in Marilyn Monroe, the deceased American actress? Or moon-row like a row of moons?

Two teenage girls walk by sharing a blue slushy. The one with a thick mass of coffee-coloured hair takes a sip and hands the cup over to her friend, whose short hair is tinted the bright pink of a well-fed flamingo. Sticking out blue tongues at each other, they double over in laughter. They're wearing high-waisted shorts so short that when they bend, I glimpse the lobes of their flat-flat buttocks.

Dark clouds have gathered above the high-rise across the street as though getting ready to pounce. But the sunlight pierces their serrated margins, turning them into silver beacons.

The sound of my cellphone jolts me. The call has a Ugandan country code.

"Kaaka!" I shout into the phone. My elation keeps her name in my mouth longer, making it last.

"Harriet, it's me," my father answers, his voice loud and strident. A call from Father frightens me a little. Always, I phone him. It's never the other way around. His preferred medium of communication is email – lengthy reports with headings and subheadings. The last one had an index and a couple of footnotes about his observations of infanticide amongst chimpanzees in Kibale Forest, our sanctuary's rainforest home. Did I know that contrary to previous observations of infanticide, deadly aggression in chimpanzees is not a gender-specific trait?

"Are you there, Harriet?"

I brace myself. "I'm here."

"It's about your Kaaka." Father's voice suddenly acquires an uncharacteristic softness. "She has died."

He likes directness, my father. And sharp things. He has a prized collection of spears and *pangas* in his office that he says our forefathers carried with them when they migrated from Rwanda many centuries ago. In this moment, his words are a machete that cuts me to the core. I feel empty as though the part of me that's most substantial has left, leaving me hollow. Only skin and bone.

My hand goes limp and slowly falls from my ear until finally the phone hits the carpeted floor. I can still hear Father, but his voice is now muffled and distant, reaching me as though through a tunnel. I lower myself into the dining chair that has found a permanent place by my living-room window. I finger the cowrie shell necklace around my neck, wishing to go back in time before having this knowledge, back in time when I felt whole.

Time passes and it doesn't. Father's faraway voice through the phone stops, and silence eclipses the room. How long have I been sitting here, lost? He'll be worried, want to know I can be strong.

I hear the ping of email arriving. It's from Father. Kaaka went missing the evening before and when she didn't return by nightfall, he put together a search party. A game ranger found her body lying among the moss under a tree canopy behind the waterfalls.

"It was lucky he found the body when he did, before some wild animals got to it. That would have been gruesome," Father's email says. I wonder about the moment my Kaaka became *the body*. Did it hurt? Or was it peaceful?

Outside, the dark clouds have huddled closer together, blocking out the sun. Then slanted lashes of rain beat down from the sky, battering my windowpane like they want into the apartment.

I pull on my sneakers and fly down the stairs, a caged bird let loose. I run toward Wascana Lake, a path shown to me by Mr. Stevenson. Gaining speed, I part grey sheets of rain as hot tears run down my cheeks. Every few minutes, bolts of lightning fire up the black skies followed by a ripping sound like a great big cloth being torn down the seam. I splash through silver puddles pooling on the concrete lip of the lake. I want so badly to go back home.

"I'll have more tea," Kaaka says on the evening before I leave for Canada. But when I refill her cup, she sets it on the tree stump behind her, next to the Kerosene lantern

radiating amber light into the dusk. She fishes a lilac satin bag from the deep pocket of her tunic and presses it into the palm of my hand.

“Hold onto these for me, will you?”

The bag’s contents clink together as I loosen the string tie to reveal cowries, their porcelain surfaces gleaming like sea-polished rocks. Kaaka stretches herself out on the mat, looking up into the stars as though she hasn’t just offered me an everlasting memory. This ninety-year-old woman who raised me would have given me the shells on the night of my wedding to wish upon my marriage the strength of the Indian Ocean. Except I haven’t brought a suitor home, and at thirty years old I’ve turned into an old maid.

“Have you also given up on me ever getting married, Kaaka?”

“Not at all,” she says, still looking up into the indigo sky dotted with millions of stars, her hands forming a pillow underneath her cloud of grey hair. “I know you will get married. This is just my way of telling you that your worth isn’t tied to marriage and procreation.”

I try to undo the knot in the necklace I wear, the one I inherited from Mother after she died, but it won’t loosen. It seems to have become tighter as the years have gone by. I keep tugging and pulling until eventually it loosens and comes apart. Mother had only six cowries on her necklace. Adding my new six makes it fuller, heavier. I’ll be an old maid with twelve cowries around my neck, which is rare.

The light from the lantern makes shadows of the wrinkles in Kaaka’s mahogany face. Lying there on the mat, she looks solemn as if trying to untangle knots from an old memory. I’m struck by how tiny she is, how little space she takes up on our mat. She reminds me of a stub of a pencil worn with its work, the best of its years shaved away.

My mother was a dressmaker. In my head, I have an image of her sitting behind her sewing machine on the front porch of our cabin, a yellow pencil sticking out from behind her ear. As the pencils shrunk, she’d shove them into her puffy hair. I always imagined the tiny pencils getting lost in that thick hair, getting trapped in its tangles, no way out. I wanted to save them but Mother never let me touch her hair.

“I can’t remember her face,” I say, lying down besides Kaaka. “Mother’s face. The contours of it have faded.” The realization, saying it out loud, hurts my chest. What kind of a daughter forgets her mother’s face?

“You’re the spitting image of her,” Kaaka says. “Look into a mirror anytime and hers is the face that looks back at you. You have her voice, too. Sometimes I hear you speak and I think, Holy Stars! My daughter lives inside my granddaughter.”

I was eight years old when Mother succumbed to the poison of a black mamba. That’s when Kaaka came to live with Father and me. (Grandfather had left her years before to go live with a much younger woman.) On the day of my mother’s funeral, Kaaka told me that Nyabingi, the rain goddess our tribe worships, had called Mother into the spirit world. She wanted me to understand that my mother still lived on, only now her physical presence was lost to us. I didn’t tell her that her explanation was cruel, that it only made it harder for me to grieve for my mother.

“Tell me again how she died,” I say, willing myself to accept her view of death, that it births one into a form of oneself bigger than life and visible only to the living whose eyes have grown eyes.

“You know how it happened. If you still have to ask, it means you doubt.”

I’m a primatologist. I believe in verifiable, quantifiable data and logical explanations of the world. I was born in a cabin on the edge of a river and I see connections everywhere. I bridge between species, places, and time. I was six years old when I first learned the names of all the birds in our sanctuary, from the little Bronze Mannikin to the imposing Shoebill. I wrote them down in a notebook and recited them to tourists from Europe and North America like a morning prayer. I was ten when a baby chimpanzee hooted and purred his way into my heart. When we found him, Father and me, he still clung to his dead mother’s leg. A poacher had shot her and left her for dead. It was then that I decided to study non-human primates, to try and protect them from humans.

“But how do you know for certain that Nyabingi took her? How do you know if Nyabingi exists?” I hear myself ask Kaaka.

“Because her spirit has visited me every night since she passed on. That’s how I know.”

This is brand new information. I don’t know how to respond to it so I lie there quietly, too many questions hanging in the air above me.

The day after Mother’s funeral, Kaaka packed a picnic. She sat me down by the river and said, “Repeat after me: My mother has been ushered into the spirit world.”

I repeated the phrase because she'd told me to, not because I believed it.

"Say it with conviction," She pleaded. "I'm certain of it the way I know that the moon is the moon and the sun is the sun."

I wanted to believe her. Really, I did. But when the customary week of mourning ended and I returned to school, I told anyone who asked that a snake which moves faster than most people can run, whose venom is so potent and fast-acting that only two drops of it paralyzes its victims, killing them within an hour, which has a head the shape of a coffin and a mouth blacker than the chimney of a kerosene lantern, struck my mother twice. Trying to get away from this snake, she fell into the nameless river that runs through the sanctuary, and the river spat her out at its frothy mouth where it feeds the swamp. That's more or less what Father had told me. The rest I had read in his big book on snakes of East Africa.

"Our dead are always with us," Kaaka is saying now. There's a hint of suppressed anger in her voice. "You must always remember this."

"I know but—"

"Why is it impossible for you to believe in a world whose existence you can't explain?" Kaaka speaks over my objection. "You are smart enough to know that just because you can't see something that doesn't mean it's not there."

A sort of electric hush charged with the loud singing of crickets sits between us. In the distance it creates, I probe the walls of Kaaka's theory of death, walls that are warped and distorted and never hold up whenever subjected to reason. But I suppose gods don't listen to reason. I suppose gods go about doing whatever they want even if it means leaving a trail of orphaned children and childless mothers.

"She just materializes at the foot of my bed like an image from a projector," Kaaka says. It takes me a moment to realize she's talking about Mother's spirit. "Except it's obviously not just an image because she tidies up in my room. She walks around picking my tunics from the floor and folding them and putting them away in my wardrobe."

"No!"

"She talks to me, too. It's a kind of wordless communication like the hum of the forest. It took me a while to understand it, but now I do."

I want to ask her what else Mother has told her, but I don't. If she wants to, she will tell me unbidden. And after a moment's silence she does. Kaaka wants me to know that

mother's spirit has promised to escort her over to the other side soon, very soon. She wants me to be prepared for this possibility. I'm not to worry, though, she warns. I'm not to cry. This is the ending she desires. It's what she's always hoped for. I should want it for her.

"Will you come back and visit me?" I say, all of my sensible questions having deserted me. "When Mother takes you, will you come back to me?"

"If you want me to."

I don't know how long I've been running when a dog's bark stops me short in a dimly lit back alley. He's a large black dog with a rumpled coat like the skin of an elephant. A white picket fence overrun with vines separates us. He scratches at it with his paws before giving up and turning away from me.

The rain has let up, but I'm still dripping wet, cold to the bone. I resume running to generate warmth. A bearded man with a long whip of braided hair down his back is standing outside a convenience store. He yells his sexual desires at me in an alcohol-induced drawl. I run. When we are scared, time slows. I'm running so fast it feels as if I'm standing still and everything around me is a blur. It seems incredible to me now that an hour or so ago I thought staying in my apartment one second longer might kill me. And now that I've strayed too far and don't know how to get back, I want, more than anything, the safety of its concrete walls.

I see a street sign up ahead, Cameron Street. The houses on it look alike, old and eccentric. I run up to the closest one and ring the bell by its purple door. My heart is beating sorely against my ribs. My throat is burning.

"I'm lost," I tell the middle-aged woman who opens the door. Waves of chocolate-coloured hair frame her long face. "May I use your phone to call a cab?"

"Come in, come in," she says, pulling the door wide open. Then looking up a narrow staircase, she shouts, "Ganapati!" Her accent is East-Indian. Her body emanates warmth and the sweet smell of jasmine. She offers me a large towel from a linen closet.

A man comes down the creaking stairs wearing a frown on his face. His white slacks are folded up at the bottom like someone at the beach who wants to wade into the water without getting their clothes wet. When he sees me, he tilts his head at a questioning angle.

“Weren’t you about to leave?” the woman asks him but doesn’t wait for his answer. “Can you drive this young woman to her home so she won’t be swindled by a cab driver? Their fees are exorbitant, aren’t they?”

I nod my head yes, even though I’ve never taken a cab.

The man introduces himself. He says I can call him Ganesh.

I put his name on my tongue, toss it around my mouth, and push it out between my teeth. I once knew a man with the same name. Ganesh. He stayed in one of our guest cabins at the sanctuary for three months. He wrote poems in jagged cursive all day long. In between bouts of writing, he walked around on calloused feet, touching Kaaka’s honeysuckles, cutting his fingers on her roses, sucking up the little beads of blood. In the evenings, he sat cross-legged outside the cabin and recited his day’s work. Kaaka and I listened to him in blissful incomprehension.

I shake Ganesh’s hand, and a symphony surges through my brain. His face glows as though he’s lit from within. My body is in love with him, this stranger named for a god. It bends toward him like a vining plant to light.

“I love your necklace,” he says.

“Thank you. The cowrie shells are a gift from my grandmother Harriet. I’m named for her. My name is Harriet.”

“A beautiful name.”

Ganesh opens the passenger door of his blue sedan for me. He turns a corner onto 13th Avenue, and soon we are cruising down Albert Street. The shimmering surface of Wascana Lake is lit with fiery shades of gold and red. Where did I lose my way along this lake? Can we outrun fate?

“Here we are,” he says, pulling up in front of my apartment building. “I’ll walk you to the door.”

I want to tell him that he needn’t. That contrary to prevailing evidence, I’m quite normal. That running too far and getting lost was really the universe’s doing, not mine. But I hear how alien this self-defence sounds in my head, how lacking in logic, and I let him walk me to the entrance of my building.

We stand at the door and I awkwardly fumble around my wet pants, feeling for which one of its many pockets hides the key. Finding it, I hold it up victoriously, evidence that I’m not crazy, not completely. But mad people probably think that they are the

normal ones – everyone else is insane and should get help.

“I better get going then,” he says. But he doesn’t leave. We stand at the door as though held together by something outside of ourselves.

“Would you like to come in?” I ask.

“Sure. But I can’t stay long.”

Inside my apartment, Ganesh offers me the details of his life like a present. He left India five years ago to attend a music residency at the Regina Conservatory of Performing Arts, and then he decided to stay afterwards. Now he’s a pianist with the local symphony orchestra. The woman is his aunt. She owns an Indian restaurant downtown, and he dines with her every Sunday. Would I like him to make us some tea? What kind of tea do I have?

“Lemongrass. I have dry lemongrass.” I pull open a kitchen cabinet to find it. “I brought it from home in Ziploc bags. In cut-up bits. An airport security officer wanted to toss them into a garbage can.”

“Why?” Ganesh says, his hazel-green eyes wide with surprise.

“He was worried I might try and plant ‘whatever this stuff is’ on Canadian soil.”

Ganesh’s laughter is the warm colour of hope. I excuse myself to change out of my wet clothes. When I return to the kitchen, Ganesh is tossing a fistful of lemongrass into a pan with water. As the lemongrass boils, its fragrance fills my apartment with the sweet smell of home. I close my eyes and inhale its aroma, remembering a time so recent yet so irretrievably gone.

Ganesh takes a sip of the tea and purses his lips; the taste hasn’t lived up to his expectations. He sets the cup down on the kitchen counter and scribbles his phone number in my day planner that I left open after breakfast.

“You’ll call me?” he asks.

“I will.”

“You promise?” His high-pitched voice sounds like pleading.

“I do.”

On the morning I leave for Canada, Kaaka puts her hand on my back and leaves it there as she accompanies me to my father’s beat-up Range Rover, caked with mud. We stand on the passenger side. I drape myself around her small frame, breathing her in, letting

her clean scent – the smell of soap just unwrapped from its package – cleanse all the fissures of my soul. I transform my body into a plaster mould and imprint her on it, creating an impression of her on me.

“Christmas will come quickly,” she whispers. “We’ll see each other very soon.”

When she lets go of me, I have a sinking feeling like I have fallen out of time.

I’m sitting in my living room drinking the tea Ganesh abandoned. Without sugarcane syrup it’s bland, like a cheap, watered-down version of the real thing. But the aroma is potent and breathing it is restful.

I sink deeper into the couch, dropping my head over the backrest like someone getting their hair washed in a salon. And that’s when I feel it – a hand on my shoulder. The sensation is real enough for me to jump up, terrified, but all I see behind the couch is an unadorned wall the colour of dry bone. And yet my shoulder carries a memory of the hand, its familiar smallness and warmth. Suddenly I’m filled with a lightness of spirit and aware of the irreplaceable joy of this moment, what it might mean. Are my eyes growing eyes? I’m open to all that is possible.