"Killing Me Softly"

ADWOA NTOZAKE ONUORA

L'auteur nous raconte sa conscientisation à l'altérité de son statut d'émigrante et de la violence systémique inhérente à la racialisation et ses conséquences. Elle a été marquée comme intellectuellement inférieure dans un système d'éducation autoritaire. C'est aussi une histoire qui témoigne de la résistances des Africaines face à une violence discourtoise.

I sit on the floor beside the oversized windows with my legs crossed, scanning my trove of high school photographs. As I gaze out at the expanse of blue sky, the deceptive sunlight shines through the windows beckoning to me. I do not submit. Having lived here long enough I know better. Even as the sun's scattered beams caress my face and warm my shoulders, I know that it is freezing outside.

I think back to the summer of 1998, the year I turned 15. It was the year I graduated from Wolmers' High School for Girls; the year my father received the news that my long awaited papers being filed by Mummy through Citizenship and Immigration Canada had been approved; the year I said goodbye to my Island home and boarded a plane for what was to become my new home, Toronto.

Seated on the floor of the apartment I saw my first day at Weston Collegiate Institute. Mummy and I sat between two girls on a row of benches outside the guidance counsellor's office. A man, in his late sixties perhaps, face blemished by age lines with thin hair stretched and pasted across his balding forehead, appeared in the hallway. His thin, cherry pink lips parted in a smile that inched wider and wider across his ghostly pale face. He scanned a piece of paper attached to a clipboard in his hand, and looked out into the hallway through brilliant blue eyes that glistened through his rounded spectacles before calling out in and unexpectedly harsh, raspy voice, "Watson, you can come in now."

As he walked down the hallway in front of us, his uneven gait drew my attention. He hobbled on one foot dragging the other closely behind him. He led us into his office, closed the door, shook my mother's hand, and introduced himself (Mr. Albanese was his name) before sitting in a big-armed, dark brown leather chair that swallowed his slender frame. Except for the mahogany stained desk intruding on the space between the guidance counselor and us, the office had very little furniture. Even still, the atmosphere inside the dimly lit room weighed heavy.

Off to one side of the desk in a corner stood a vintage coat hanger embossed with ornate vines and flowers meticulously crafted onto a wrought-iron rod. The vines danced around the pole eventually spilling out into an open claw at the top where a felt hat sat comfortably.

On the opposite side stood a filing cabinet that also doubled as a shelf. On the shelf sat a lamp whose depressing glow flickered into the small space, gradually dying as it landed onto the bare off-white walls. I gazed at the odd looking large yellow shade meticulously painted with pictures of horses running in an open field.

He opened his mouth to speak. His words poured with such profusion they surged through the yawning gap that was his mouth, and spilled over his crooked yellow teeth before leaping and landing onto my mother and me. As he spoke, the flesh separating Mummy's freshly plucked eyebrows furled into ripples. They remained unyielding as he continued to speak. My mother, now overwhelmed by the volley of words—words she

knew nothing about—offered up the only response she could, her still furrowed brow.

I sat quietly, scribbling notes in my notepad. Leaning forward on the edge of my chair, I glanced at the pile of papers he stacked before Mummy.

She looked away surreptitiously. Reaching down deep into her large patent leather handbag, I could hear her air-brushed acrylic nails claw through loose change, compact, wallet and a pair of scissors—my mother always carried a pair of scissors in her purse—before making their way to an opening in the side of the purse. Her hand surfaced, clutching a zip-lock bag filled with report cards from my old high school, transcripts, immunization cards and immigration papers. She placed the bag on the desk before him.

His eyes darted away from the package towards Mummy's face. He continued to tell her what courses I should enroll in, quickly mulling over the difference between basic and advanced level courses. Mr. Albanese's words rained on Mummy, trickling down like water running off a duck's back.

"Mrs. Watson," he said, then paused and cleared his throat before continuing. "Hmm, hmmm, it is Mrs. is it?" Mummy nodded. I looked at him with disdain knowing that the question he really wanted to ask was, "Are you married?" He continued to speak. Mummy listened intently trying to digest his words. He continued, "I recommend that she take all the basic courses to start just so she can get used to the system."

He stopped talking. I managed to squeeze a few words in.

"I don't want to do basic level courses, I can do the advanced ones."

He sat motionless, staring at me. His pale face suddenly looked feverish. I leered back at him defiantly.

"You speak English very well," he said in an incredulous tone.

I wanted to let out a scream of protest. I wanted to respond with, "The British colonial lackeys in Jamaican schools spent years shoving English down my throat from the moment I started kindergarten. Of course I speak English!" A violent fury welled up inside me, emboldening me to say in a still petulant voice, "Yes, of course I do. And I will do just fine taking the advanced level courses." I heard my Jamaican accent weave its way through my words, quickly filling the small room.

I shrugged in contemptuous reproach lifting the zip-lock bag from his desk before handing it back to Mummy. His recently spoken words rolled around like marbles in my head. I sat and stared off into the grim distance thinking: a man who assumed without knowing anything or caring to know anything about me, who thought I was intellectually inferior, was deciding my future. That day, I left the office bereft of hope that I would survive in that school. By the time I walked through the glass doors of his office, down the freshly polished corridors of Weston Collegiate Institute, the hurt, the sadness, the despondency slowly dissipated.

It was still light out when Mummy and I left the guidance counsellor's office that day. A faint glow from the brilliant reddish orange sun setting, pressed against the sky suspended itself behind the sprawling brown buildings that lined Jane Street and Lawrence Avenue West.

As we hurried down Lawrence Avenue West, I thought about finding something to eat. My stomach growled loudly. Mummy heard. We looked at each other and laughed out loud.

Strolling past the Money Mart at the corner of Weston Road and Lawrence Avenue, I saw a car parked off to the side of road with a man seated inside wearing an orange T-shirt. The car pulsated with a hip-hop beat as Lauryn Hill belted out "Killing me softly with his song, killing me softly with his song, telling my whole life with his words, killing me softly." The car hurled bass into the streets provoking rapid movements from the hips of two girls standing by a bench at the bus stop.

We walked on, passing a kaleidoscope of banks, fast food joints, a barbershop, and a store displaying an array of colourful hair weaves and "African beauty products" all closely pressed together until we eventually slowed at the entrance of a store where a sign suspended on metal rods read "Chu's Convenience and Variety store." A smaller, laminated red and white "Come in we're open" sign on the glass door beckoned us. The door let out a shrill ding-dong as Mummy pushed it open. I followed.

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The aroma of freshly baked bread bothered my nose. My mouth swelled with saliva as we strode toward the counter where a short, small-eyed, frail, sixtyish-looking woman peeked over the cash register smiling. Mummy placed her order and slid a toonie and a loonie across the glass counter.

The woman extended her hands, punched a few keys on the cash register, and deposited the change in the drawer before hobbling off, disappearing into the back of the store. Moments later she reappeared, holding two crispy hot-out-of-the-oven Jamaican beef patties sandwiched between two cocoa breads—just the way we would have it back home. The glass door chimed again as we pulled it open. We continued in the direction toward our apartment building.

Adwoa Ntozake Onuora received her Ph.D. at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. She has worked in formal and informal educational settings and has established expertise in community-situated learning, indigenous knowledges, equity, and social change. As a facilitator, Adwoa brings to life critical equity frameworks, storytelling, and narrative. Her research interests include diversity in education, cultural studies, indigenous knowledges, the intersections and impact of gender, sexuality/sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class, abilities, and culture on women's lived experiences.

RENEE NORMAN

This Is What It All Comes To

gumming cookies
I soften for her in tea
her teeth in a container
on the table
mouth and mind unwilling
the teeth an irony of centrepiece

she is hungry
I cut crusts off egg sandwich
hand her tiny pieces
wonder if it hurts
to chew with gums
she is back to baby

the woman who shakes and shakes
approaches
her babble either foreign or nonsense
I can't tell
pat-pat-pats me on the back
folds in the tag on my shirt
I feel her longing
solicitude a tribute of sorts
she knows the tenuous
mother-daughter bonds

in a surprising burst of lost language
my mother asks
for a solution
high-vocab-speak for drink
later I rub her back shoulders
arms
the only conversation she truly understands
she tells me
stop picking
I am back to baby

Renee Norman's poetry appears earlier in this volume.