This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30056520

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2013, The Australasian Association of Writing Programs
My best friend’s name is Simbovala. I love her with all of my heart. Only I can say her name properly—Sim-bo-va-la. Everyone else just calls her Simba. I only call her Simbovala when we are alone. I whisper it to her when we lie down under the Weeping Willow tree in my back yard. It sounds like a secret. It makes her laugh. She laughs like the birds. Only I can make her laugh.

Today we stare up at the sky through the branches of the weeping willow. The branches dance like hair. Simbovala doesn’t have the dancing type of hair; hers is like sea sponge, springy and spiky. Mostly Simbovala wears her hair in tiny plaits that look as though they are stuck to her head. We break branches from the Willow and wrap them around our heads like a wreath. We pretend that we are in Africa. Simbovala calls Africa her homeland.

When I tell Simbovala that the tree’s name is Weeping Willow, she stops still and stares at the sky. She stares up through the bendy branches and she has tears in her eyes. Now I call it the crying tree.

Simbovala teaches me how to do the cross-clapping hands that she does with her friends at the homeland. We chant Homeland, Homeland as we walk around the trunk of the Willow. Simbovala says she will walk backwards because I’m not very good at doing the cross-clapping hands and walking at the same time. We fall down in the end, sprawled and laughing. We are still there when my older brother, Cam, walks through the back gate. He says that we are queer.

That night, Cam says that I am infatuated with Simbovala. Mum says don’t be so ridiculous. I look infatuated up in the dictionary. It says: foolishly in love, obsessed. I am infatuated with Simbovala’s laugh; I am infatuated with her hair, with the chalky-smoothness of her cross-clapping hands, with the milky half-moons on her nails.

I am the best girl speller in grade six. James is nearly as good as me but he’s a boy and he got rhythm wrong last time. James has trouble with Simbovala’s name. The first time he says it, he stumbles. I laugh, so does Simbovala. James doesn’t usually stumble and he goes red. Then he calls Simbovala: The Lion Hunter. I hate James. Mum says you shouldn’t hate people but I definitely hate James. I can’t help it. I hate him with all of my heart.

Cam says that Simbovala and I are freaks. I can’t really hate Cam because he is my brother. I do hate him sometimes but then it goes away. Cam is six years older than me. When Mum is on the phone to my aunty, she says that Cam is difficult, a trying child. Dad tells Cam to stop being an asshole.

Simbovala tells me stories. We swap stories, like I give her Cinderella or Snow White for one about her homeland. I rush through my stories because they’re just fairytales. Simbovala’s stories are about real life, like her name means: While you mark out a field, Death marks you out in life. She says it reminds us that, as we live, we are in the midst of death.

It’s a bit spooky, like a curse, but I want to keep hearing it. I make her tell me it all the time. I pretend I can’t remember it because I’m infatuated with that one. She knows that I already know it but I need to hear it out of her homeland voice.

My name is Annie. It means mercy, grace. I am named after my grandmother. She is dead. Whenever I say: dead, Simbovala says: The earth does not get fat. She says it in a voice that’s like quiet men singing. It means: however many people are buried in the earth, the earth is never satisfied. Creepy hey, like the earth is after us.

I try to think up new reasons to say dead. I tell her stories from the news just so that I can say dead, died, dying. I tie the stringy branches of the Weeping Willow around my neck and I say it like Simbovala says it: The earth does not get fat—The earth does not get fat—but she doesn’t get
creeped out. Then I say it in the voice from Cam’s scary movies. Simbovala laughs hard: she sounds like a magpie. Her laugh turns sad at the end as if she’s missing someone.

One day, Cam calls Simbovala a dark witch. I hate him so much that I think I could probably kill him. He calls her a witch because we took the radio out of his room and put it under the Willow tree. I call Cam an asshole. He is trying to hurt me because he knows that I love Simbovala with all of my heart.

Simbovala says: Don’t worry about Cam. She says: No polecat ever smelt its own stink. It means Cam thinks he knows everything but he is blind because he can’t see himself. She is exactly right. Cam yells at me, and at Mum and Dad, and that is the reason: he can’t see that he’s causing it all. That’s him being difficult; that’s him being trying. I’m glad he’s a polecat. He hates cats.

I smile, looking up at the shapes that the bendy, willow branches mark out in the sky. Simbovala says: Tell me one, so I say: Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.

Sometimes Simbovala gets very serious and her eyes look like black glass. She says that the songs from her homeland have matching stories and matching songs. I think of the words and the stories and the songs, all fitting together like the wooden dolls on my bookshelf, one hiding inside the other.

The proverbs are the short ones, says Simbovala, and I nod, looking straight at her eyes, just like I do to Mrs Mistle, so she knows I’m paying attention. They are for teaching a lesson, she says, like the polecat, she adds and we both laugh.

I say: Tell me another one.

The baboons laughed at one another’s overhanging eyebrows, says Simbovala.

I don’t get it, I say.

She says: One another’s, you see, because they all have the same eyebrows but they don’t know, because baboons don’t look in the mirror.

Like—You can’t see past the end of your own nose.

Ooh, I like that one, she says. Imagine how big your nose would be if you couldn’t see past, she laughs. Tell me another one.

That’s the pot calling the kettle black, I say. I blurt it out as quickly as I can just to satisfy her, even though I know that mine are not as mysterious as hers. I tell her the first one that I can think of because she’s begging me.

Sometimes I think that she only asks me to tell her some so that it’s even, so that I feel like I’m giving her something back. Simbovala is quiet, like she doesn’t understand, but she doesn’t ask me to explain. It’s because they’re both black, I say. Like Cam said to Mum: You’re so selfish, because she won’t buy him a car, and Mum said: Now that’s the pot calling the kettle black. Simbovala is still quiet. It’s not racist, I say, remembering that Cam is an asshole.

I stand up and take hold of the strong, ropey branches of the Willow. I pretend to swing at Simbovala. I’m a polecat, I say. I have come to return you to the earth. Simbovala laughs so hard that she has to hold her belly and curl herself into a ball on the ground. What’s so funny? I ask, lying next to her so that I can feel the rumble of her laugh.

She turns over to face me. Polecats are small, she says, puffing to get her breath. They don’t swing, she laughs. They’re like your homeland cat, but they live in the wild and they smell.

Like a skunk? I ask, thinking how generous it is that she gives me a homeland of my own, like I’m a queen or something.

A what? She laughs hard and gurgly. She can’t get a breath in. I can’t answer because I’m laughing too.

At night Simbovala’s stories wake me up. They are not funny. Her laugh is taken back to the earth and it echoes like voices in a cave, but the voices are dead and screaming because the
earth is swallowing them, eating them alive. Simbovala is laughing hard and baby polecat-skunks climb out of her dead mouth and squirt their stink everywhere. I squeal and cry and Mum comes.

In the morning, Mum says that she thinks I am spending too much time with Simbovala. She says that I need to extend my friendship circle. Cam takes his earphones out of his ears. He sits opposite me at the table, chewing and listening hard. Mum doesn’t even tell him to close his mouth. He crunches his cereal, eating it as revoltingly as he can, because he knows he is annoying me. He gawks at me like a stunned polecat.

I don’t want to play with anyone else, I say hysterically, crying nearly as hard as I did in the middle of the night.

Mum says: Settle down right now please. People are different, simple as that.

Cam says: Simbovala must have put a curse on you and that’s why you’re acting so fruity.

Mum says: Don’t be so ridiculous and put your lunch in your bag. Then she says: What about if we invite Casey over to play on the weekend? You could sleep out in the tent under the Willow tree.

Casey’s a polecat, I say. Mum sips her tea. She looks into the mug, sniffs it, then pours it down the sink. She puts her hand on my forehead, looks at her watch.

The nightmares go on and on. Always the earth is trying to eat Simbovala alive. Then the baboons chase Cam to get him to the place where the earth eats people. I hide behind the Willow tree. I don’t help him because I’m too scared and I don’t want to die. In the dream Cam’s not my brother. In the dream it doesn’t matter if I don’t love him or I do.

The next afternoon we take Cam’s radio again. I thought he wouldn’t know; I thought he had basketball training. Cam throws a pinecone at Simbovala. He says he was going for me because I called him a polecat. That’s what he says but he’s a pretty good aim and he’s a pretty good liar. The pinecone scratches Simbovala’s eye, the actual eyeball, and her eye won’t stop crying.

We take Simbovala home before Mum and Dad go for their walk. Dad is trying to get skinnier so Mum hides the potato chips in the laundry cupboard; she says that Dad can come with her on her walks … even though it’s her thinking time.

Simbovala’s mum and dad come out onto the verandah to meet us. Her dad puts his hand out to my dad and then to Mum. His name is Mansa. He says: Call me Rex. Both names mean king, that’s what Simbovala told me. He has a beautiful voice, a little bit scary if you were in the dark but beautiful anyway.

Mum does the talking. She says it was an accident. She says we’re very sorry indeed. She says Cam is having a troubled time at present, he thinks he knows everything, won’t be told.

Aah, says Rex, showing his massive white teeth as if he is opening his mouth at the dentist. The won’t-be-told man sees by the bloodstain.

Steady on; steady on, says Dad, scruffing up his forehead like he’s getting a headache. My stomach grumbles. Cam caused this whole thing and he’s probably just relaxing, watching the telly with his feet up on the couch, eating everyone’s dinner.

We’re very sorry, says Mum, looking at Dad like he better SHUTUP or he won’t be coming on the walk.

Simbovala’s brother comes out of the front door. He stands on the verandah too and they are all in a row. Simbovala’s brother is about the same age as Cam but he is bigger than any man I know. His name is Neo. They didn’t change his name or Simbovala’s.

Mum starts up again. She is doing that thing where she is in a conversation with someone but she starts talking to herself, it’s very annoying. Cam … she starts, but then she stops and starts again. Our boy did the wrong thing. We’re very sorry. If only he would listen …
Aah, and a goat may beget an ox and a white man sew on a native head ring, says Rex, putting an arm around Neo, throwing his big head back and laughing hard. He sounds like Simbovala but his laugh is deeper, more spread out. He opens his mouth really wide when he laughs and it reminds me of the baby polecats.

Just remember who you're talking to, says Dad, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. Just remember where you are, in the street with the old white man. He chuckles when he says it so it sounds friendly but he looks a bit nervous, like when he's watching the horse races on Saturday afternoon.

It's like 'Pigs might fly', Dad, I say quietly. I look at Simbovala and she winks at me, just like Mrs Mistle when I got rhythm right.

Simbovala’s mum’s name is Amadika. She says: Call me Amy. She stretches out her hand in the direction of the front door; she stretches it slow and long like a lady dancing. She says: Will you come? But Dad already took a step back when he said the thing about the white man so I know we’re not going in.

Thank you Amy but we will go, says Mum, pausing thoughtfully. Amy—that means Beloved. Mum looks pleased with herself. She looks at me as if she wants me to say: Yes, that’s the way Mum, but Amy isn’t her real name and Beloved is not a story.

I look at Simbovala. She has tears in her good eye. She scrunches the layers of her skirt in her hands so that the floral ruffles ride up her skinny, black thigh. I can’t take my eyes off her because I love her with all of my heart.

Amy taps Simbovala’s hand away from her skirt. Then she takes Simbovala’s hand in her own but Simbovala wriggles her fingers to get free.

I want to say: Waah! I’m a polecat! I want to say it loud and close to Simbovala’s face so that she will laugh. I hate Cam. I hate Dad. I especially hate Mum.

We turn around to leave. Rex keeps talking as we head out of the cracked, concrete driveway. He talks in a loud voice, behind our backs, but it’s not a secret from us. He’s talking to all of us and to nobody at all, sort of like Mum does except that he knows we’re listening; he just doesn’t need us to answer. He says: The man with the deepest eyes can’t see the moon until it is fifteen days old.

Dad turns back to Mum. He says: Do you think he’s having a crack at me?

Leave it alone. We’re all different. We’ve made our peace.

He’s a few sheep short, I reckon, says Dad, and Mum shushes him. Can’t see the wood for the trees.

The next day Simbovala does her oral presentation on ‘Someone I Really Admire’. She talks about her dead grandmother but she doesn’t say dead, she says passed over, and because she skips out on dead, she doesn’t say: The earth does not get fat. She looks at me. She knows I want it.

I say it in my head because I’m addicted: The earth does not get fat—The earth does not get fat. I can’t get her voice right in my mind and that scares me even more than the earth, eating people.

Simbovala finishes off her presentation with a saying from her mum; she says: The dying of the heart is a thing unshared. Mrs Mistle asks her to repeat it and then she writes it up on the board. Everyone claps. James sniggers.

That saying is an asshole, a baboon’s overhanging asshole. I don’t know why Mrs Mistle is so over the moon about it. Simbovala has never said that one before and I hate it when the parents do the homework for their kids.

It wasn’t me who threw the pinecone. Sticks and stones and bones.

I didn’t know you were supposed to do the talk about someone you knew. I thought it had to be, like, someone famous so I did mine about Mother Theresa. Some people say she was more like an angel than a person but angels aren’t really real and she’s dead now.
The earth does not get fat—The earth does not get fat.