‘‘Where were you last night?” asked Mukoma.

‘‘In a drum. Mai Ranga hid me,” I replied shivering already.

‘‘You are lucky she did,” Mukoma said, then dashed forward and poised his hand.

In an attempt to duck the blow, a back hander, I stumbled and fell, and Mukoma laughed. That’s when I knew he was not angry anymore, so I stood up and started laughing too, just as he had taught me to—to laugh whenever he laughed.

‘‘You know I can kill you if I want, right?”

‘‘Yes. And I will always do what you tell me to do.”

‘‘Good boy. Now go let the goats out,” he said. I left immediately, and felt lucky brother had forgiven me. But the thought of Shami in a village far away tugged at my heart, and I too had forgiven brother, but telling him that could invite a sound beating.

My brother. He was the most accomplished village fighter, one of the few able-bodied men remaining in the village. Most had left for the war, but brother said he had been lucky because when village men his age started joining the liberation struggle, he was in South Africa . Now it was much harder for anyone to force him to join the war since he said he knew how to argue. He once told me that one did not have to join the comrades to be part of the struggle. He was already fighting a great war raising a young boy and also keeping healthy livestock, which the comrades demanded for food each time they held a base in our village. Since brother was not at war, Mai, his mother, whom I also called mother since birth mother had died immediately after I was born, always said that he was bored being one of the few men remaining in the village, so then he entertained himself with fights. But I liked to watch him fight; I really did. I only hated when he used those massive fists on me, saying I needed to know how real men’s fists felt. When he was serious about beating me, though, he would send me to get a strong Mopane whip for myself.

The day I ended in Mai Ranga’s empty grain barrel, I had done a bad job fetching a whip. Brother was working on his baboon stools, carving them with a sharp adze. He was an expert in making baboon stools, which were regular wood stools with a baboon carved into the middle of the two flat ends people sat on. Once, when he was drunk, I asked him why he liked making baboon stools and he said that he hated the animals, great corn thieves which not only stole, but also defecated in the field.

‘‘And you know their dirt just looks like human mounds,” he said, reminding me never to tell mother he had told me this dirt thing. I never told Mai about baboon dirt, but on the day I ended up in Mai Ranga’s drum I swear I could have told mother about what he had told me. Not only about the baboon but also the secret about how he might consider joining the soldiers, whom everyone considered the enemy of the revolution. The soldiers fought for the whites, the comrades fought for the independence of the country. This we had been told at that one meeting of the comrades and the children; we had been asked to pledge that we would always remember the comrades were on the side of the people while the soldiers, in their ugly green uniforms, were on the side of the enemy.

The trouble on this day began with me getting another adze, thinking I could try to make my own animal stool, but I wasn’t going to make a baboon one. I had a hare in mind. That became problem number one, which Mukoma addressed immediately.

‘‘You can’t just decide to waste my tree trying to make a hare. Hares are weak, smart yes, but very weak. Make a baboon,” he said, returning to his stool.

I started making a baboon. Right when the head was appearing, problem number two occurred. The adze missed the wood and sliced some skin off my foot, which sent blood squirting to freedom. Then I howled. Brother turned, looked at me, and when he saw the wound on my foot and the adze lying on the ground, his face contorted into a cloud of anger. I stopped screaming, remembering the most important rule about working with him. And I knew what I was supposed to do. So I wiped my tears, limped away, but upon feeling his eyes looking particularly at my limping, I straightened up and walked like I was just fine.

‘‘Make sure you don’t waste that trip!” I heard him clearly, but this time I decided to do things differently.

Instead of fetching a Mopane whip, I went to a Mubondo tree. I thought Mubondo whips were more painful—they looked so—than the Mopane. But boy was I wrong when I returned to Mukoma with the fairly long and fat whip, which I knew was ready to greet my bottom. Mukoma didn’t have to say anything in response. One look on his face told me to go back to the usual Mopane. Mopane whips were just killers, so painful you often wondered whether they had just been created to be weapons of pain. And indeed, Chari, whose father, another man who had not joined the war but told everyone he was a comrade, beat him often as well, had confirmed that Mopane was just for the purpose of straightening bad boys like me. He told me he was not bad; his father whipped him to put Mopane trees to use. But I did not agree with him. We also used Mopani for other things, especially firewood. I liked Mopane wood fire, but hated the burn of the whip on my bottom.

I returned, whip in hand, approaching Mukoma slowly. He was waiting, smoking some tobacco wrapped in a piece of newspaper. The cigarette packs he had brought from South Africa were gone by now, and he had taken to smoking this tobacco that made him twist his body with each pull, then bulged his lips excessively. I walked, slower, but determined to hand him the whip; soon this—the beating itself—would be over, and I would put salted water on my wound and then go to collect the goats and enclose them in their pen. But something in me told me not to keep walking, so I stopped.

Mukoma threw the burnt-out tobacco stub on the ground, looked at me with red eyes, then at the whip, and I knew I had done something really wrong. The whip didn’t satisfy him, but he was not telling me to go try again. My eyes naturally lowered and stopped at his hands, which were swelling into fists. I heard no voice, I saw no light of revelation, but I immediately took off, and heard the mess of wood and half-carved heaps toppling over as brother got on his feet to chase after me. “I’m gonna kill you, you bloody fool!” I heard him say as the wind got hold of my arms and turned them into wings.

I surely wasn’t flying because when I glanced back brother was closely behind me, his whole massive body transformed to what might have qualified to be a fast-moving wheel. But I increased speed, meandered, jumped over something, turned to the left, sharply to the right, and heard a heavy sound on the ground behind, glanced back, and what I saw was not just a miracle, but a spectacular wonder: Mukoma was rolling on the ground, holding a leg, but soon he was up again, cursing and pointing, and I sped. I kept running and running without glancing back, not knowing where I was going at all, but just flying and flying. Mukoma was nicely standing by a tree in front in front, extending his arms in a welcome pose, smiling even, and saying, “Hello Tari.”

For a moment, I felt the urge to just run into those arms, enjoy the embrace while it lasted, but start to beg and beg so he would just give a warning this time. But what I had thought was a smile was

something I could not name. I felt my head spin the way it did sometimes when I was in great fear, this slight dizziness that clouded the reality of everything else around me, but my body surprised me when it managed a sharp reversal and a turn I had never known myself to be capable of. This time I was running towards somewhere.

There was this rule in our village that if an adult was disciplining a child and that child just ran away and took refuge in someone's house, then the adult was supposed to stop the pursuit. In fact, the adult was supposed to forgive the child immediately and join the family for dinner or whatever they were having. So I ran towards Mhere's home, Mhere a respected village man who sometimes worked in the towns. At that point I could not remember if he was one of the few men of the village who had not joined the war. But I knew that running to his home and entering one of his huts would be a safe refuge.

Mhere's wife, whom everyone called Mai Kundai, was cooking when I stormed into the hut. She sprung up, gathering her skirt tightly around her legs, but letting it go when she saw it was me. "Go play outside! This is not a cave for hide-and-seek. *Sva!* Go! Do you--?" At that point I saw a shadow emerging from the door and my heart started racing, speeding up when I saw the expression on Mai Kundai's face. She just stood there open-mouthed. I turned to look at the door. Mukoma had just stepped in, angrier than I had ever seen him. He was advancing, fists already poised. Then Mai Kundai jumped to action, planning herself between us.

''Don't get involved in this Mai Kundai," said Mukoma, in a low, shaking voice. He sounded like something was choking him, a sign that things were not good for me anymore. My stomach growled and cramped in the middle.

''But you are in my house!" shouted Mai Kundai , who was known for tolerating no nonsense from anyone.

''Your house has my prey!"

''Are you not ashamed, such a grown man, storming in after a child who has sought refugee? What happened to your values?"

''Woman, I don't care who you are. I'm not your husband, and stop talking to me like you want something from me. I'm not your husband to the war, you hear me?"

''What did you say?" sputtered Mai Kundai. "Let me remind you, *mukuwasha*, this is my house, and you see that boiling *sadza* on the fire, I can empty the whole pot on you, as long as you are in my house, my yard, my property."

That was the wrong thing to say because something possessed Mukoma, who pushed her aside, and reached out to grab me from behind her. When she moved, I moved, remaining behind her all the while. And Mukoma jumped in an attempt to catch me. His eyes were red, his anger making him shake. The woman, who was also shaking with anger, screamed, bringing Mukoma to a standstill, but then the scream, too dry to be real, was short lived. Mukoma advanced, but Mai Kundai managed to turn her back to the door, giving me the advantage of remaining behind her on the exit side. Before Mukoma realized what was happening, I shot out of the hut, and took off toward Chigorira hill.

I was breathing heavily, but my legs were telling me stopping would not be good. I ran and ran and ran, turned and noticed Mukoma standing outside the hut, still talking to Mhere's wife. I knew he was not done with me, that I had just done something I would regret the rest of my life, and with these thoughts I found myself entering Mai Ranga's compound, noticing as I did so a group of men sitting around a fire, drinking beer.

''Someone catch that rabbit!" shouted the man who saw me first. I stopped in the middle of the yard, already thinking of turning and running in another direction, but then Mai Ranga saw me and said, "Chii young boy? Come tell mbuya what's going on?"

''I said catch that rabbit!" shouted the man, who tried to get up, but fell right back on his baboon stool.

Mai Ranga, her hand wiping tears off my face, turned and looked at the man, "Tukano! You say one

more word about a rabbit and this is the last time you will set your foot here."

‘‘You know when these little ones--."

‘‘Shut your tin!" said VaDzoro, the old man who had seven wives, who sat opposite Tukano, on a leopard stool.

‘‘You shut yours, old man!" retorted the man, at the same time Mai Ranga pulled me across the yard to the fire, and while she parked me by her side, she pushed the man, saying, "I don't think I care much about the little coins you give me in exchange for my beer. Leave now!"

Then another man, oh, Mirosi, Mukoma's friend, said, "I will apologize on behalf of Tukano." And he started clapping his hands in apology; a few of the men followed suit. Mirosi, addressing Mai Ranga, then said, "You better do something with that boy; otherwise his brother will be here soon, and you know when he takes his stuff what he does."

‘‘He is always like that," said VaDzoro. "Something sure got in him in Joni."

‘‘Leave South Africa alone. It's the war. The spirits of the dead soldiers are possessing everyone nowadays," a man I had never seen before said.

‘‘Irrelevant!" shouted Tukano eyes torching the man. He turned to look at Mai Ranga. "I suggest that you do something with that boy soon though." I was surprised he did not call me a rabbit this time, but instead looked in the direction I had emerged as if he expected to see my brother.

‘‘He is right," agreed VaDzoro. "But what can you do though? You know he will be here soon. And you know that one, he will find the boy even if you hide him in your skirts!" A few men collapsed laughing.

‘‘Nothing is funny!" shouted Mai Ranga.

‘‘Hide him well, and I don't mean just hiding him. Think of something, hide him like a comrade," said someone. I stood by Mai Ranga's side, but my mind was not here. My head kept turning in the direction of Chigorira hill, and of our home. Then I saw someone, or something, and heard a man say, "Better hurry up. The crazy one will be here soon."

Several arms pulled me towards Mai Ranga's storage hut. My head kept turning; I didn't want it to, but it could not stop. A door opened and a man said, "Let me lift him, you hold the door."

‘‘No, you hold the door. Hurry up."

Mai Ranga called from within, "Ehe! Perfect place. Here! Bring him here!"

We were now in the dark hut. The man said, "There? Are sure? Is that going to work?"

‘‘This is the best. His brother would never even suspect, even if we let him search in this hut."

I was lifted, and then placed in a huge container, a metal barrel.

‘‘Are we closing it?"

‘‘Let's close it." I started to struggle, wanting to escape and continue running.

‘‘Hey! Hey! Sit in there. You want to stay alive, then sit there."

My heart was knocking hard against my chest. I was deep in the container, where the darkness held its fists high.

‘‘Close it. He is going to be fine; there are two holes so he can breathe." I heard Mai Ranga say, as the drum's lid was put in place. Then there was a knock on one the top of the drum. "Hey in there!

Make sure you keep your nose by this hole here, or this one here. Do you see them, Tari?"

‘‘Ye-es", I said, suppressing the urge to sneeze.

They talked for a few moments longer, then left. I heard the door close. As I was about to shift in order to sit more comfortably against the metal of the drum, I heard the door banging open and Mukoma saying, “You said you didn’t see him at all?"

‘‘No, why would I have seen him?" Mai Ranga’s voice was low, almost a whisper.

‘‘I am just asking." Pause. ‘And you are serious that he is not in here somewhere?"

‘‘Why would he be there? Is he my child?" asked Mai Ranga, impatiently.

‘‘Because if he is, there will be trouble here."

‘‘Says who?"

‘‘So you want to play games with me now? You do? You do?"

‘‘Don’t even dare get closer to me. I want you away from my hut too. Yes, I am talking to you. I’m not one of your girlfriends. Move."

‘‘Listen, lady."

‘‘What? Since when am I your lady? We send you overseas and you come back calling us ladies! What is wrong with our young men these days? Is it the spirit of the war?"

‘‘Mbuya, you will make me lose it!" shouted Mukoma. " South Africa is not overseas, and who gave you the idea that you sent me there?"

Then I heard the stamping of feet on the ground; then another male voice said, “Jefi, I know you have a right to beat the boy, wherever he is, but you are crossing the line here. You can’t talk like that to Mai Ranga, who in many ways is your aunt."

‘‘Back off, man!" shouted Mukoma.

‘‘Who are you calling man? Me who is like a brother to your mother, me who saw you growing up, me who helps your mother with her field work. Man, that’s all you know to call me?" That was VaNgeya speaking, the old man who always visited hour home.

There was another sound signaling the arrival of someone. Mai Ranga coughed. Then I heard a third male voice saying, “We know you are a grown up man, the more reason you shouldn’t waste your time chasing kids around."

Mukoma growled, “Listen, Tukano, you have no right to meddle in my business."

‘‘Since when do you have a business, and am I the middle man?"

There was laughter from—I think—the fire. Even Mai Ranga coughed out a brief laugh. Then she said, “You men, there is beer to be drunk, and money to exchange hands. Let’s get moving. You too Jefi, give us that South Africa money! Hurry up. Ah, where are you going? Is your head well? Who are you to think you may try to sneak in an old woman’s private hut and think you can get away with it?"

‘‘Because if you are lying to me there will be trouble here. I want to search on my own," he said.

‘‘I don’t see that happening!"

‘‘Just watch.” Then the door was opened again, but someone tried to close it, then it banged against the wall inside as it opened. There was now some light in the drum.

‘‘Don’t get in there, or you will have a naked old woman standing in front of you.”

‘‘No, there will be no naked woman…. Ah, hey what do you think you are doing?”

‘‘I told you what is going to happen if you try to get in there. How would you feel if I came and tried to force my way into your *tsapi*?”

Several voices shouted from the fire, mostly inaudible things, but the loudest one said, “Jefi, you are playing with fire now.”

Mukoma remained silent. I waited for Mai Ranga’s voice. It did not come, but the man at the fire said, “Certain things just let go! You know the comrades get time to play, even when they know the soldiers are nearby.”

‘‘Your point?” shouted Mukoma.

‘‘You can’t live like this, young man.”

‘‘And why are you so angry? What did they do to you there in South Africa ?”

Mukoma did not answer. No one spoke for a moment. Then I heard the door close, then footsteps fading away. Some more silence, then a big sigh from Mai Ranga.

‘‘Mirosi, your friend didn’t answer VaDzoro’s question. You saw how there was a cloud on his face and he just walked away?”

‘‘It’s the war spirit. He should have joined the comrades. These young men who remained just need do something, to go and fight,” said VaDzoro.

‘‘But that doesn’t make sense. He carves stools; helps his mother.”

‘‘But remember the war brought many evils. Look at the evil filling up the bellies of our daughters in this village.”

‘‘But is that what’s making him beat the poor boy everyday?
“Maybe. Don’t they say Shami ran away with a comrade?”

‘‘They do. So what does that mean?”

‘‘Ah, where have you been, Mai Ranga? Aren’t you this village’s radio?”

‘‘But I don’t know what Shami has to do with anything.”

‘‘Well, she was already pregnant when she slept with that comrade.”

‘‘So you are saying--. Did she use to play with Jefi?”

‘‘Play? Ha! Ha! Ha! You must mean *play*.”

‘‘*Hezvo, nhai vedu*! This war is evil.”

‘‘He refused to marry her, so she found a comrade. The comrade sent her to his village. Even comrades are stupid too.”

‘‘That’s a story,” said Mai Ranga. “But I don’t want him to continue beating this orphan though. Poor

boy."

‘‘That will end. Like he said, let him do his job of raising the boy."

‘‘Since when does *ganja* raise a person?"

‘‘Ganja? What are you talking about now?"

‘‘Come on, you saw his eyes."

‘‘But still--."

‘‘Yeah, he should leave the poor boy alone."

I sat in the drum, tears streaming down my face. I was not thinking about Mukoma anymore, not afraid even. I was thinking about the war. I was thinking about growing up one day to join the war and kill that comrade. I was thinking about Shami, who had always been nice to me, taking me to the stores, buying me things, sometimes cooking for me when she came to visit brother, back when he laughed a lot.

I wasn't thinking anymore. I was just sitting in the drum.

Then I heard Mai Ranga say, "Let's finish up. I have to go to the field tomorrow."

‘‘We thank you our keeper," said a man's voice.

Other voices expressed gratitude in like manner, and then they faded away in the distance. But one more male voice, VaDzoro's, said, "You don't need company tonight?"

‘‘There is a boy here. Don't you have any sense?"

‘‘Will you let the boy go?"

‘‘Sure. I'll take him there myself."

‘‘So what's the problem?"

‘‘He'll sleep here. I want to punish the brother, crazy man. People who don't grow."

‘‘Some of us are grown."

‘‘No, you are not. Find your way home." There was a pause, and then Mai Ranga added, "Wives are waiting."

‘‘Did you have to go there?"

‘‘I just did."

Then, coughing, VaDzoro left.

Suddenly, there was silence, then the sounds of Mai Ranga putting away things. The sounds faded and I curled in the barrel settle into sleep, but the wound on my foot started to hurt.

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Emmanuel Sigauke grew up in Zimbabwe where he studied English and Linguistics at the University of Zimbabwe. While still a student, he helped in the founding of the Zimbabwe Budding Writers Association, for which he served as National Secretary from 1992 to 1995. This organization, which is still active in Zimbabwe, was instrumental in the discovery of new writing talent throughout the country. Sigauke moved to California in 1996, where he studied for an English MA at Sacramento State University. He teaches composition and writing at Cosumnes River College, where he is one of the editors of *Cosumnes River Journal*. Emmanuel recently joined the Sacramento Poetry Center as a board member, where he hosts readings and reviews books for *Poetry Now*. His poetry has appeared in print and online journals in Zimbabwe, Finland, United States and Ireland, and he is the editor of the online magazine *Munyori Poetry Journal* (http://munyori.com).