

HITTING BUDAPEST

NOVIOLET BULAWAYO

WE ARE ON OUR WAY TO BUDAPEST: Bastard and Chipo and Godknows and Sbho and Stina and me. We are going even though we are not allowed to cross Mzilikazi Road, even though Bastard is supposed to be watching his little sister Fraction, even though mother would kill me dead if she found out; we are going. There are guavas to steal in Budapest, and right now I'd die for guavas, or anything for that matter. My stomach feels like somebody just took a shovel and dug everything out.

Getting out of Paradise is not so hard since the mothers are busy with hair and talk. They just glance at us when we file past and then look away. We don't have to worry about the men under the jacaranda either since their eyes never lift from the draughts. Only the little kids see us and want to follow, but Bastard just wallops the naked one at the front with a fist on his big head and they all turn back.

We are running when we hit the bush; Bastard at the front because he won country-game today and he thinks he rules, and then me and Godknows, Stina, and finally Chipo, who used to outrun everybody in Paradise but not anymore because her grandfather made her pregnant. After crossing Mzilikazi we slither through another bush, gallop along Hope Street past the big stadium with the glimmering benches we'll never sit on. Finally we hit Budapest. We have to stop once for Chipo to rest.

"When are you going to have the baby anyway?" Bastard says. Bastard doesn't like it when we have to stop for her. He even tried to get us not to play with her altogether.

"I'll have it one day."

"What's one day? Tomorrow? Thursday? Next week?"



"Can't you see her stomach is still small? The baby has to grow."

"A baby grows outside. That's the reason they are born. So they grow."

"Well, it's not time yet. That's why it's still a stomach."

"Is it a boy or girl?"

"It's a boy. The first baby is supposed to be a boy."

"But you're a girl and you're a first-born."

"I said *supposed*."

"You. Shut your mouth, it's not even your stomach."

"I think it's a girl. I don't feel it kicking."

"Boys kick and punch and butt their heads."

"Do you want a boy?"

"No. Yes. Maybe. I don't know."

"Where exactly does a baby come out of?"

"From the same way it gets into the stomach."

"How exactly does it get into the stomach?"

"First, God has to put it in there."

"No, not God. A man has to put it in there, my cousin Musa told me. Didn't your grandfather put it in there Chipo?"

She nods.

"Then if a man put it in there, why doesn't he take it out?"

"Because it's women who give birth, big-head. That's why they have breasts to suckle the baby."

"But Chipo's breasts are small. Like stones."

"They will grow when the baby comes. Isn't it Chipo?"

"I don't want my breasts to grow. I don't want a baby. I don't want anything, just guavas," Chipo says, and takes off. We run after her, and when we get right in the middle of Budapest, we stop. Budapest is like a different country. A country where people who are not like us live.

But not an ordinary country—it looks like everybody woke up one day and closed their gates, doors, and windows, picked up their passports, and left for better countries. Even the air is empty; no burning things, no smell of cooking food or something rotting; just plain air with nothing in its hands.

Budapest is big, big houses with the graveled yards and tall fences and durawalls and flowers and green trees, heavy with fruit that's waiting for us since nobody around here seems to know what fruit is for. It's the fruit that gives us courage, otherwise we wouldn't dare be here. I keep expecting the streets to spit and tell us to go back to the shanty.

We used to steal from Chipo's uncle's tree, but that was not *stealing* stealing. Now we have finished all the guavas in his tree so we have moved to strangers' houses. We have stolen from so many, I cannot even count. It's Godknows who decided that we pick a street and stay on it until we have gone through all the houses. Then we go to the next street. This is so we do not confuse where we have been with where we are going. It's like a pattern, and Godknows says this way we can be better thieves.

Today we start a new street and so we carefully scout around. We pass SADC Street, where we already harvested every guava tree two weeks ago. We see white curtains part and a face peer from a window of the cream home with the statue of a urinating

boy with wings. We stand and stare, looking to see what the face will do, when the window opens and a small voice shouts for us to stop. We remain standing, not because the voice told us to stop, but because none of us has started to run, and because the voice does not sound dangerous. Music pours out of the window onto the street; it's not *kwaito*, it's not dance hall, it's not anything we know.

A tall, thin woman opens the door and comes out of the house. She is eating something, and she waves as she walks toward us. Already we can tell from the woman's thinness that we are not even going to run. We wait for her, so we can see what she is smiling for, or at; nobody really ever smiles at us in Paradise. Except Mother of Bones, who smiles at anything. The woman stops at the gate; it's locked, and she didn't bring the keys to open it.

"Jeez, I can't stand the heat, and the hard earth, how do you guys ever do it?" the woman asks in her not-dangerous voice. She takes a bite of the thing in her hand, and smiles. A nice, pink camera dangles from her neck. We all look at the woman's feet peeking out from underneath her long skirt. They are clean and pretty feet, like a baby's. She is wiggling her toes. I don't remember my own feet ever looking like that, maybe when I was born.

Then I look up at the woman's red, chewing mouth. I can tell from the vein at the side of her neck, and the way she smacks her big lips, that what she is eating tastes good. I look closely at her long hand, at the thing she is eating. It is flat, and the outer part is crusty. The top looks creamy and soft, and there are coin-like things on it, a deep pink, the color of burn wounds. I also see sprinkles of red and green and yellow, and finally the brown bumps, like pimples.

"What's that?" Chipo asks, pointing at the thing with one hand and rubbing her stomach with the other. Now that she is pregnant, Chipo likes to play with her stomach every time she talks. The stomach is the size of a

soccer ball, not too big. We all look at the woman's mouth and wait to hear what she will say.

"Oh, this? It's a camera," the woman says, which we know. She wipes her hand on her skirt and pats the camera. She then aims what is left of the thing at the bin by the door, misses, and laughs, but I don't see anything funny. The woman looks at us, like maybe she wants us to laugh since she is laughing, but we are busy looking at the thing, flying in the air like a dead bird before hitting the ground. We have never seen anyone throw food away. I look sideways at Chipo.

"How old are you?" the woman says to Chipo, looking at her stomach like she has never seen anybody pregnant. But Chipo is not even listening, she is busy looking at the thing lying there on the ground.

"She is ten," Godknows replies for Chipo. "We are nine, me and her, like twinses," Godknows says, meaning him and me. "And Bastard is eleven and Sbho is eight, and Stina we don't know."

"Wow," the woman says, playing with her camera.

"And how old are you?" Godknows asks her. "And where are you from?" I'm thinking about how Godknows talks too much.

"Me? Well, I'm 33, and I'm from London. This is my first time visiting my dad's country."

"I ate some sweets from London once. Uncle Polite sent them when he first got there but that was a long time ago. Now he doesn't even write," Godknows says. The woman's twisted mouth finishes chewing. I swallow with her.

"You look fifteen, like a child," Godknows says. I am expecting the woman to slap Godknows's big mouth for saying that, but then she only laughs like she has been told something to be proud of.

"Thank you," she says. I look at her like what is there to thank? and then at the others, and I know they think the woman is strange too. She runs

a hand in her hair, which looks matted and dirty; if I lived in Budapest I would wash my whole body every day and comb my hair nicely to show I was a real person living in a real place.

“Do you guys mind if I take a picture?”

We do not answer because we are not used to adults asking us anything; we just look at the woman take a few steps back, at her fierce hair, at her skirt that sweeps the ground when she walks, at her pretty peeking feet, at her big jewelry, at her large eyes, at her smooth brown skin that doesn't even have a scar to show she is a living person, at the earring on her nose, at her T-shirt that says “Save Darfur.”

“Come on, say cheese, say cheese, cheese, cheeeeeeeese,” the woman enthuses, and everyone says “cheese.” Myself I don't really say, because I am busy trying to remember what cheese means exactly, and I cannot remember. Yesterday Mother of Bones told us the story of Dudu the bird, who learned and sang a new song whose words she did not really know the meaning of, and was caught, killed, and cooked for dinner because in the song she was actually begging people to kill and cook her.

The woman points at me, nods, and tells me to say “cheeeeeese” and I say it because she is smiling like she knows me really well. I say it slowly at first, and then I say, “cheese” and “cheese,” and I'm saying “cheese cheeeeeese” and everyone is saying “cheese cheese cheese” and we are all singing the word and the camera is clicking and clicking and clicking. Then Stina, who never really speaks, just starts and walks away. The woman stops taking pictures and says, “Are you ok?” but Stina does not stop. Then Chipu walks away after Stina, rubbing her stomach, then the rest of us all walk away after them.

We leave the woman standing there, taking pictures. Bastard stops at the corner of SADC and starts shouting insults at her, and I remember the thing, and that she threw it away without even asking us if we wanted it, and I begin shouting too, and everyone

else joins in. We shout and we shout and we shout; we want to eat the thing she was eating, we want to make noise in Budapest, we want our hunger to go away. The woman just looks at us, puzzled, and hurries back into the house and we shout after her still. We get hoarse shouting. Our throats itch. When the woman closes her door and disappears, we stop and slowly walk away to find guavas.

Bastard says when we grow up we will stop stealing guavas and move to bigger things inside the houses. When that time comes, I'll not even be here; I'll be living in America with Aunt Fostalina, doing better things. But for now, the guavas. We decide on IMF Street, on a white house so big it looms like a mountain. In front is a large swimming pool, empty chairs all around it.

The good thing with this pretty house is that the mountain is set far back in the yard, and our guavas are right within reach, as if they heard we were coming and ran out to meet us. It doesn't take long to climb over the durawall, onto the tree, and fill our plastic bags with bull guavas. These ones are big, like a man's fist, and do not ripen to yellow like the regular guavas; they stay green on the outside, pink and fluffy on the inside. They taste so good I cannot even explain it.

GOING BACK TO Paradise, we do not run. We walk nicely like Budapest is now our country, eating guavas along the way and spitting the peels all over to make the place dirty. We stop at the corner of AU Street for Chipu to vomit. Today her vomit looks like urine, but thicker. We leave it there, uncovered.

“One day I will live here, in a house just like that,” Sbho says, biting a thick guava. She looks to the left and points to a big blue house with the long row of steps, flowers all around it. Her voice sounds like she knows what she is talking about.

“How are you going to do that?” I ask.

Sbho spits peels on the street and says, with her big eyes, “I just know it.”

“She is going to do it in her dreams,” Bastard says to the sun, and throws a guava at the durawall of Sbho's house. The guava explodes and stains the wall pink. I bite into a sweet guava. I don't like grinding the bull guava seeds especially because they are tough and it takes a long time to do, so I just grind them gently, sometimes swallow them whole even though I know what will happen.

“Why did you do that?” Sbho looks at the now-dirty durawall of her house, and then at Bastard. Bastard giggles, throws another guava. It misses the wall but hits the gate. The gate does

THE FOUR QUESTIONS

Seth Landman

In a great abundance of weaponry, I dreamt my great aunt Lillian smoothed my spine and erased my affliction. I became lost and did not want a direction. Her quilt was straight on my bed and seemed to be an ellipsis in which I could not rest. She spoke to me in Yiddish. There was a dim light in the room and my eyes felt swollen. I knew my life would continue. All of my concerns were needless. I carried the quilt outside. An airplane blinked across the sky and I thought about all of the commandments. How could I dream of them? How could I have invented this? I closed my eyes and began to know the stitches were a sign. A trapezoid would mean trouble ahead. Any shape. There is a legacy of nothing to understand, said the quilt in letters. You will build an aqueduct, and you will not be destroyed.

not make noise like a real gate is supposed to.

"Because I can. Because I can do what I want. Besides, what does it matter?"

"Because you just heard me say I like the house, so you are not supposed to do anything to it. Why don't you pick another house that I don't care about?"

"Well, that doesn't make it your house does it?" Bastard wears a black tracksuit bottom that he never takes off, and a faded orange T-shirt that says "Cornell." He takes off the Cornell T-shirt, ties it over his head, and I don't know if it makes him look ugly or pretty, if he really looks like a man or woman. He turns and starts walking backwards so he can walk facing Sbho. He always likes that whomever he is quarreling with look right at him. He has beaten us all, except Stina.

"And besides, Budapest is not a toilet where anyone can just walk in. You can never live here."

"I'm going to marry a man from Budapest. He'll take me away from Paradise, away from the shacks and Heavenway and Fambeki and everything else," Sbho says.

"Ha ha. You think a man will marry you with your missing teeth? I wouldn't even marry you myself," says Godknows, shouting over his shoulder. He and Chipo and Stina walk ahead of us. I look at Godknows's shorts, torn at the back, at his pitch-black buttocks peeping like strange eyes through the dirty white fabric.

"I'm not talking to you big-head!" Sbho shouts at Godknows. "Besides, my teeth will grow back. Mother says I will even be more beautiful too!"

Godknows flings his hand and makes a "whatever" sign because he has nothing to say to that. Everybody knows that Sbho is pretty, prettier than all of us here, prettier than all the children in Paradise. Sometimes we refuse to play with her if she won't stop talking like we don't already know it.

"Well, I don't care, I'm going out of the country myself. I will make a lot of money and come back and buy a

house in this very Budapest or Los Angeles, even Paris," Bastard says.

"When we were going to school, my teacher Mr. Gono said you need an education to make money, that's what he said, my own teacher." Chipo rubs her stomach, and says Mr. Gono's name so proudly like he is her own father, like he is something special, like maybe it's him inside her stomach.

"And how will you do that when we are not going to school?" Chipo adds.

"I don't need school to make money. What Bible did you read that from huh?"

Bastard screams at Chipo, bringing his face close to hers like he will bite her nose off. Chipo caresses her stomach and eats the rest of her guava quietly. She walks faster, away from us.

"I'm going to America to live with my Aunt Fostalina; it won't be long, you'll see," I say, raising my voice so they can all hear. I start on a brand new guava; it is so sweet I finish it in just three bites. I don't even bother chewing the seeds.

"America is too far," Bastard says, bored. "I don't want to go anywhere where I have to go by air. What if you get stuck there and you can't come back? Me I'm going to South Africa or Botswana, that way, when things get bad, I can just get on the road without talking to anybody; you have to be able to easily return from wherever you go."

I look at Bastard and think what to say to him. A guava seed is stuck between my gum and my last side teeth and I try to reach for it with my tongue. I finally use my finger. It tastes like earwax.

"America is far," Chipo says, agreeing with Bastard. She stops briefly, her hand under her stomach, so we can catch up with her. "What if something happens to your plane when you are in it? What about the terrorists?"

I think flat-face, soccer-ball-stomach Chipo is only saying it to please ugly-face Bastard since he just screamed at her. I give her a talking eye, but my mouth just keeps chewing.

"I don't care, I'm going," I say, and walk fast to catch up with Godknows

and Stina because I know where the talk will end if Chipo and Bastard gang up on me.

"Well, go, go to that America and work in nursing homes and clean poop. You think we have never heard the stories!" Bastard screams to my back but I just keep walking.

I think about turning right around and beating Bastard up for saying that about my America. I would slap him, butt him on his big forehead, and then slam my fist into his mouth and make him spit his teeth. I would pound his stomach until he vomited all the guavas he has eaten, pin him to the ground. I would jab my knee into his back, fold his hands behind him and then pull his head back till he begged for his life. But I shut up and walk away. I know he is just jealous. Because he has nobody in America. Because Aunt Fostalina is not his aunt. Because he is Bastard and I am Darling.

BY THE TIME we get back to Paradise the guavas are finished and our stomachs are so full we are almost crawling. We will just drink water for the night, listen to Mother of Bones tell us a story, and go to sleep. We stop to defecate in the bush. It is best to do so before it gets too dark otherwise no one will accompany you; you have to pass the cemetery to get to the bush and you might meet a ghost.

We all find places, and me, I squat behind a rock. This is the worst part about guavas; all those seeds get you constipated when you eat too much. When it comes to defecating, we get in so much pain, like trying to give birth to a country. Minutes and minutes and minutes pass and nobody shouts, "I'm done, hurry up."

We are all squatting like that, in our different places, and I'm beating my thighs with fists to make a cramp go away when somebody screams. Not the kind of scream that comes from when you push too hard and a guava seed cuts your anus; it says "come and see," so I stop pushing, pull up my underwear and abandon my rock. And

there, squatting and screaming, is Godknows. He is also pointing ahead in the thick trees, and we see it, a tall thing dangling in a tree.

"What's that?" somebody, I don't know who, whispers. Nobody answers because now we can all see what it is. A woman dangles from a green rope. The sun squeezes through the leaves, and gives everything a strange color that makes the woman's light skin glow like there are red-hot coals inside her.

The woman's thin arms hang limp at the sides, and her hands and feet point to the ground, like somebody drew her there, a straight line hanging in the air. Her eyes are the scariest part, they look too white, and her mouth is open wide. The woman is wearing a yellow dress, and the grass licks the tip of her shoes.

"Let's run," Stina says. They are the first words Stina has spoken since country-game. When Stina speaks you know it's something important, and I get ready to run.

"Coward, can't you see she's hanged herself and now she's dead?" Bastard picks a stone and throws; it hits the woman on the thigh. I expect something will happen but then nothing does, the woman just does not move.

"See, I told you she is dead." Bastard says, in that voice he uses when he is reminding us who is the boss.

"God will punish you for that," Godknows says.

Bastard throws another stone. It hits the woman on the leg with a *khu* sound. The woman still does not move. I am terrified; it is like she is looking at me from the corner of her white, popped eye. Looking and waiting for me to do something I don't know what.

"God does not live here, idiot," Bastard says. He throws another stone that only grazes the woman's yellow dress, and I am glad he missed.

"I will go and tell my mother," Sbho says, sounding like she wants to cry. Stina starts to leave, and Sbho and

Godknows and I follow him. Bastard stays behind for a little while, but when I look over my shoulder, I see him right there behind us. I know he can't stay in the bush by himself, with a dead woman, even though he wants to make like he is the president of Paradise. We start walking together again, but then Bastard jumps in front of us.

"Wait, who wants bread?" he says, tightening the Cornell T-Shirt on his head. I look at the wound on Bastard's chest, just below his left breast. It's almost pink like the inside of a guava.

"Where is it?" I say.

"Listen, did you notice how that woman's shoes look almost new? If we can get them then we can sell them and buy a loaf, or maybe even one-and-a-half. What do you say?"

We all turn around and follow Bastard back into the bush, and we are rushing, then we are running, then we are running and laughing and laughing and laughing. **BR**

Boston University Graduate School of Arts & Sciences MFA in Creative Writing

OUR PROGRAM, ONE OF THE OLDEST, MOST PRESTIGIOUS, and selective in the country, was recently placed among the top ten by *The Atlantic Monthly*, which went on to rank our faculty and our alumni among the top five. The magazine might have been impressed by our two most celebrated workshops—one, in poetry, was led by Robert Lowell, who had scattered around him Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and George Starbuck; the other, much more recent, was led by Leslie Epstein, whose students included Ha Jin, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Peter Ho Davies. Our classes still meet in the same small room, which allows through its dusty windows a glimpse of the Charles. These days, the poetry workshops are led by our regular faculty, Robert Pinsky, Louise Glück, and Rosanna Warren; those in fiction are led by Leslie Epstein, Ha Jin himself, and Allegra Goodman. Our famed playwriting classes are taught by Kate Snodgrass, Ronan Noone, and Melinda Lopez. We are also pleased to add that, thanks to a generous donor, we are launching a new fellowships program that aims to send a good number of our students abroad for a typical stay of three months, after completing their intensive workshops here.

It is difficult to know how best to measure a student's success or the worth of a program to a writer. Our graduates have won every major award in each of their genres, including, in playwriting, the Charles MacArthur Award, the Heideman Award, and four Elliot

Norton awards; in poetry, the Whiting Award, the Norma Farber First Book Award, along with three winners of the Discovery/The Nation Award and two winners of the National Poetry Series; in fiction our graduates have won the Pulitzer Prize, the PEN/Faulkner, the PEN/Hemingway, and the National Book Award. Every month one of our graduates brings out a book of poetry or fiction with a major publisher; and some, like Sue Miller and Arthur Golden, have spent a good deal of time on bestseller lists. Over the last decade we have placed more than a score of our graduates in tenure-track positions at important universities (Peter Ho Davies and Carl Phillips direct the creative writing programs at Michigan and Washington University in St. Louis).

We make, of course, no such assurances. Our only promise to those who join us is of a fair amount of time in that river-view room, time shared with other writers in a common, most difficult pursuit: the perfection of one's craft. For more information about the program, our visiting writers, financial aid, or our new Robert Pinsky Global Fellowships, please write to Director, Creative Writing Program, Boston University, 236 Bay State Road, Boston, MA 02215 or visit our website at www.bu.edu/writing.

Application deadline is March 1, 2011.



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