



HOW TO STOP THE BURNING

Zubaida Bello

How to Stop the Burning Zubaida Bello

Perennial Press

*For mommy,
For the women who cooked for me,
For the women who ate with me,*

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dySMorRpHe

And more things you will have to pull from
the earth or your womb

A alo a?

A a ó!

Pulled from a uterus
washed in water
until I spit out
 Brooklyn
like a baby's first words.

I am a magic trick.

Toluwafemi say I'm more
scam
than magic.
But niggas still don't know
where I am
from.

Hint 1: In Williamsburg, I am everything:
 security Guard
 employee
 invisible
or visible but not *seen*
or visibly a threat.

Hint 2: My death is worth \$2.75 or a metro swipe or a
baconeggandcheese (in the right borough).

Hint 3: Real niggas ain't real niggas if they ain't got a twang.
So I am a real nigga in the bodega, when I sing
along with Manuel as he pulls my chopped cheese from the
thick New York summer air.

So I am a real nigga in Lagos, when I hide
my *oyinbo* accent from every *yahoo* and *area* boy.

Hint 4: I've seen a book of tickets swallow a black boy whole,
leaving his bones under the 2 train.
In Brownsville, they call this a Tuesday.
But, I am not from Brownsville.
So I call this a homegoing.

Hint 4a: I will never get a #, but some woman in Kwara state
will add me to a list and slay a goat, whispering my name as
they dance like doves in all white.

What am I?¹

¹*Confused? So am I.*

Self-Portrait as a Roast

You eat Eba
With a fork

Keep water on the table,
Can't handle suya
heat
Down Your throat
On Your fingers
Seared into your palms

All two left feet
No azonto
No akwaaba
Thought shaki was shoki
Until Your mama
slipped one in the pepper soup
And You couldn't handle
The rhythm

You loose-lipped
Tongue-tied Yoruba
Don't know the love
Of soap on your tongue
So You speak at the table
Took two slaps
To teach You
One lesson
Where you really from?

Steal Wizkid out Your cousin playlist

And give Oyinbo in college
Think this show and tell
Think this party trick
Think this something you can take
Off
And give
back

Never wore the ankara
Auntie made for You
Until Judah made it cool
So you wore it to the kickback

And let the white girls colonize the gele
Mama pained over
And You didn't even oil your scalp the night before

You learned the accent
To make Uncle Akin laugh
But, that only made You a punchline

Olodo
Thought *yaboo* boys would actually marry You
And give You the heritage off their back
That way,
You wouldn't be confused when you looked in the
mirror

But, do You hear Yourself now ?

Saying African in the ice breakers.
Saying Nigerian in the interviews

Not Naija
Not lost one

You a lost one.
Don't know what You lost
Or when You lost it,
Or how to get it back,

So you pick the leftovers off your mother's plate,
And hope
 they don't
 burn
 your tongue.

Clean Up in Aisle 4

After Wanda Coleman

White women cut in line like they cut my skin.
“Ididn’tseeyou” slithers through their lips and I start to bleed
“Watchout” buries me under the pristine, tile floor.
Sometimes, their silent stare slices my throat
and she is no different, shooting me a stare as I choke on her
violent scrutiny.
I am not sure if I am in Walmart
or my school lunch line
or Starbucks.
I’m not sure if my mouth is evidence
or armor.
I don’t even remember
how much I was
supposed
to spend.
Everything feels heavier,
when you have
to carry chili peppers on one hand

And drag your body with the other

Recipe for Pepper Soup

3-3.5 pounds of fish or goat

1 medium onion peeled and sliced

Auntie Bisi makes pepper soup in the summer, with her own peppers. My mother, her *arabinrin nla*, taught her how to grow peppers so that they yield when you pull at them. So her hands aren't hard, like Grandma's. So she doesn't have to hurt when she pulls things from the Earth. When the sun beats down on her apartment terrace, she sheds her long sleeves and tucks Jamican chili peppers under the hot rays, the same way she lets Uncle Ayo's insults fester in her mirror.

PTSD

*She tells me Boston is 2 hours away
And I believe her
Because Habeedat is 4 hours away
And my mind is a jumble
Because of subway lines and homework.
Because of all the homes I don't recognize.
Because NWA is too bold.
Because I don't know where to put my hands.*

Noun

*And so we drive through the darkness
White, middle-class America shining
through the window
An old moon with no signs of waning.*

1. Google says the difference between a gunshot and a firework is the silence that follows

*I grip my gut
And make sure I'm still here.
She grips the wheel,
And I'm still breathing.*

2. Listen, make sure it is sporadic. Make sure it isn't the crisp cadence of skin, of breath.

*It does not matter that my skin
Melts into the darkness
What does matter,
Is that her skin doesn't.*

*She is the north star,
And I cling onto her
When a police car slows down*

3. and my heart rate doesn't.

Recipe for Pepper Soup (cont.)

4-5 cloves of garlic (washed with vinegar)

Then, she pours them all into the loose of her shirt and carries them to the kitchen, letting the stems fall, a stream of mistakes behind her. The kitchen is her birthday and her funeral. I am not invited. “You are still young,” she says, “the peppers scratch and sting your fingers, *ololufe*.” It is not my turn to feel the water boil and evaporate into my skin. Still, I hear her. A thick symphony of heartbeat and death march. Still, I smell her. The stench of salty tears hidden between lamb and onions. I wonder if I’ll earn the right to see her magic trick, watch pain drown in palm oil, and be reborn into a meal for 5. I wonder if I’ll earn the right to grow soft things. Still, I taste her. My spoon barely creating ripples in the soup’s surface.

Choices, Choices

The day your mother says,
“you are not black.”

It will be three weeks into July of 2014,
and *you*
will still be breathing,
and the sun will cast a shadow over the house
and the TV will be the only thing that glows
and your mother will watch your reflection over ██████████’s
body.

But it is now,
and you know nothing of your own mortality
when Drunk in Love is on and you feel things on the BBQ
dance floor without experience.

Black Girl Magic fits better on new-found curves
than a funeral shroud.

So you bury the look opps give you as they stand around the
bodega
the same way you bury your black lives matter shirt under your
anakara
along with the fear you find in your mother’s voice.

OR

Her words will float across the empty kitchen and build a char-
nel house on your chest,
and so you will listen/obey
this is the only way to breathe

OR

CNN gives the eulogy
the headline floating across the room,
Sift into the tight gaps of your Fulani braids,
Into your throat,
And you will carry it
until something heavier and familiar takes its place.

OR

Look around your room and stuff all the blackness you can
find into a box:

the “Auto-Biography of Malcolm X”
a poster of Obama and his old hope
a worn Ta-Nehisi Coates Book
dashiki (the one Auntie bought you in Lagos)
a spilled pack of Kool-Aid dust crusted over and sour
afro Pick/ the black one/ with the fist/ that you wore to
the Independence Day parade

Watch the box grow until it is a coffin.

OR

You are 17 and bold and happy and everything a black girl
should not be.
You are 17 and bold and happy and everything a first-gen
should not be.

(which is to say, you don't answer your name with a
question mark)

(which is to say, you wear a gele with your nikes and ignore your mother's looks before you walk out the house)

(which is to say, you stand on the corner of Rockaway Ave a Nigerian woman, and emerge from the A train a Black woman, without a crease)

OR

I still jump the turnstile Cuz 2.75 is too much for a city that don't care about me Cuz the boy behind me never asked me to pick a side Only which one I wanted to be today I have not made my choice yet And the pigs stop me anyway Ask for my skin not my passports nor my ID nor my birth certificate nor if my mother split her legs between two continents to give birth to me.

OR

And I,
walk through the door at 12:30am,
Weary as if I came back from a war
to see my mother
waiting.

OR

hoping

OR

praying,

“who the hell do you think you are?”

Recipe for Pepper Soup (cont.)

3 dried bay leaves

Auntie Adelola fights with her soup. I can still taste the aftermath when she places it in front of me. Tough potatoes fighting with tender mackerel. Thick broth drowning spinach and bay leaves. When she married Uncle Ade, Mommy and Auntie Bisi tried to teach her again, but the soup became fiercer in its battle: discarded onion skin covering the kitchen floor, blood-stained paper towels overflowing the trash can, the blender a loud roar over the latest Arsenal match. She would not let her toil go unnoticed.

#

If I should ever meet the hungry eyes of a loaded barrel,
I pray Mommy makes it.
These days the “I’ll be home soon” texts hold more weight than
I can.
I tuck this burden in my pocket.
I must carry this mass in my casket.

I know grief like a cousin, but Mommy don’t
don’t know martyrdom
hollow
locked in a holster
swallowed into a gun.

I cringe as she sees my reflection under a picture of the latest
black memory turned prime time news story
She pulls out her tasbih
melts my name over her morning fatiyah
this way, Her baby can be immortal

Not police sacrifice
Not body caught in a broken windows theory
Not dead.

I call Her every day around 9:00pm
make sure my laugh rings louder than the distance between us
so She doesn’t get used to my silence
so She doesn’t have to learn of a world I don’t exist in.

I try to take up as much space as I can,
remind her that I’m still here,
She doesn’t have to plan the funeral yet.

I keep my body whole
no tattoos or haram
so She can see herself in me,
Her magic
bones that break and assemble again.
hair like chains
tongue full of poison
skin of serpents

But, do you know how hard it is to remind Her I am alive,
when every black lives matter protest looks like my wake?

In 2018, the police killed 355 black people.
In 2018, my Mother cried over me 355 times.
Performed ghusl 355 times.
Adorned me in white 355 times,
in the name of some other mother's child.

I am not bragging about how much my Mother cares about
me.

I am angry that my mother must question if I am alive
every time I'm not close enough to touch
every time I wander too far from her shadow
every time I do not answer her call.

I refuse to let my Mother hold a picture of me.
In front of journalists who will lacerate my name
in front of a country who can't count how many black girls
they don't care about
in front of people who see me casualty before daughter.

Still, Mommy, I cannot promise that tonight my body will be
tucked in my bedsheets and not 6 feet under the concrete that

holds this city up.
But I will promise you,
in this moment
on this page,
I am the more alive than I ever been
And I ain't going without a fight.

Recipe for Pepper Soup (cont.)

5 chili peppers

If anyone dared to turn up the volume on the TV or turn on the radio, she'd emerge, knife in hand, voice in air, ready to ask, "Are you mad? Don't you hear me cooking? Don't you see I was slaving away? Wasting away? Oloshi" But, we never saw her, unless she let us. When Uncle Ade left, I took his spot on the couch, hoping to catch a glimpse. I could only see her armor. I guess this is why Grandma always slights Auntie:

Oloshi

"Are you mad?"

"Did you not watch me cook?"

"Is this how you'll waste your youth?"

"You expect a man to come home to this?"

Grandma only knows submission, white onions dancing in surrender. Auntie only knows knife dances across the cutting board, searing her pain into your tongue. Grandma says she will never meet anyone who likes the taste of her soup, so Auntie is drafted to the kitchen, again.

On anxiety

My Mother always takes the groceries in on one trip Hands heavy with bags never leaning though Sturdy like a tree with too many branches too many roots She only knows baggage In the jungle, I had to carry things heavier than myself This isn't a memoir it is a fact thrown at me when depression doesn't let me get out of the bed tucked into pepper stew when anxiety stills my body Passport in one hand coffee in the other holding her womb on her crown like market women carrying palm wine on their heads She crossed that big blue galaxy like this Earth's laws ordering her to sink into waters that couldn't carry Her ancestors I ask And She whispers I learned magic from Mama and you already know who Mama is That's the magic trick I try to imagine that She leans sometimes The same way I can't shower sometimes The same way I can't breathe sometimes The same way I can't feel sometimes like that crooked outlet by my bed buried under all my blankets under all my shit Broken but working This is how I know gravity hates Her She doesn't know how to fall She just uses strong winds to cool down the ofada She just tucks the things she can't carry into her belly rolls watches them evaporate as she counts her crunches and sit-ups After Maghrib prayer

This is not a poem about my mother,
This is about the time she told me,
“omọ, you are getting heavier than me”
And carried me anyway.

Recipe for Pepper Soup (cont.)

1 ginger with rough skin

The sound of hard fist crushing stiff bone quakes the house. Uncle Tunde's soup is painful. I know because I hear it. I am not allowed in the kitchen because I cry too much when I cut the onions. Habeebat isn't allowed in the kitchen because she doesn't grate the potatoes hard enough. So, I only know the stories that Wale tells me. But, he doesn't say much, just opens his palms and shows us the red imprint of knife marks. Akin managed to learn the recipe by heart: raw chili peppers, because the dried ones are "too soft", whole garlic cloves because the boys "need to exercise their jaw", 3:1 pepper salt ratio because "spice teaches you how to endure pain".

Weight of the Sun

Jah tell me
Black people don't get
sunburn.
So he don't wear sunscreen
just shea butter
no sunglasses
no hat,
no prayer.
No need for all that,
standing under The 3
train tracks casting shadows on his back.

He say "I got blk boy Melanin"
and he right.
Cuz Mrs. Johnson say "he darker than Deandre"
and she still light up De's candles on the corner of Pitkin.

Judah say
he still be boy underneath all that blk.
But her eyes say,
"you just like De".

And I stay quiet,
cuz the sun is searing a hole
on my body
and it burns
like a candle
like teary eyes
like the smoke of a gun.

I stare at Jah

and his sharp fade
and his broad shoulders
and his blk boy melanin.

And wonder,
Will this nigga ever learn?

Recipe for Pepper Soup (cont.)

Enough bouillon to build a house

When Uncle Tunde stirs the pot with his heavy hand, he has the same hard smirk I found in Baba Wale's pictures, and he died from a heart attack. After I convinced Bamidele to go vegetarian, Uncle Tunde stopped calling me for soup. I can't remember the last time I ate with Uncle Tunde, the last time I have seen him smile over his heavy, iron pot. When Wale facetimes me, I can see his face a bloody red and wrinkled at the eyes, like his father. He tells me it is the soup.

Playing with Ghosts

White girls always here
laugh loud like nipples in mass
smirk in a vigil.

White boys do not know
how to hurt still silently
like loss took their voice

*grandma told me stop wearing your hood that's
how the boogie man decides which boys to
swallow*

News reporters lie
backwards on top our gravesite,
they take too much space.

*stank said monsters live under my bed she a
lie they live under the streetlights thats why
auntie lia always say come home before the
streetlights come on*

Learn to say their names

*do i have to write my name on the tombstone
cuz we ain't learn that yet*

Let the body rot
Before you make it suspect

*maybe it's because i stepped on a crack cracks can
kill too, like cops and robbers*

Some weren't even four
Bodies too stiff to ride slides

do this mean i can't sleepover anymore

heart/beats heavier

do this mean we can't get mcdonalds

How can I teach death
To a boy who can't be still?

don't bury me in a suit those are for adults

A girl who laugh loud?

dySMorRpHe

Catcall Graveyards be
my hips

so i
may not make
Home.

i won't be
Fire
of Stares (or at least)
i won't feel
my skin
Burning.

i don't put

my melanin

in my purse.

my body
give enough
Validation,
forallthespace
i
take.

i still get
called out.

my name not

Nigger
Black Bitch

just bitch.

Lynch Noose
a ghost limb.

so i
may not make it
Home.

The Hoodie Monster catch me.
but my Mother
will sing
my name

and no one ask
if i was enough

might be
more Hashtag
than gift

sown in darkness

and passed,

into the earth's hands.

body
broken,
body
shared

my
mouth

black
when white people
cut me

my lips woman

i spit

Blood
From two hearts.
veins tangled like carcass
discarded

maybe this is
my metamorphosis

my fem
weaves the cocoon

and the wings
on my black
are begging

**And more things you will
have to pull from the earth
or your womb**

I don't remember the day Mommy taught me. But, it was one of those summer afternoons where you'd blink and the sun would've already left. She looked at me long and hard before giving an invitation: "Oya, ja lo". I accepted it: "beḡeni mama". I watched her ankara drift along the floor as I followed her to the backyard. Her skin melted into the darkness, fumbling along the weeds, so I could only see her outline. A shift in her shoulder. A jerk of her knee. An ankle twist here. A wrinkled elbow there. Then, as if it never left, a cluster of chili pepper laid on her outstretched palm. "Oya, mu," I accepted her offering as her fingers clutched my elbows, guiding me in the darkness. She floated past me before I could reach the kitchen and continued her magic, pulling fresh ingredients and old pots from odd corners of the room. I watched the mundane be reborn under her fingers: the cutting board I used for dodo flushed green under the chili peppers, the rusted rice pot reflected the dance of flames on the stove, the blender hummed along with the fridge. I reached for an uncut pepper, hoping to mimic her tricks, but her hand snaked around my wrist before I could even come close.

"Sa wo mi, Sa wo mi," she whispered. My body fell under her chant before I could respond and I followed behind her as she danced around the kitchen.

Pour the chili peppers in first, lest their sapid spice leaks onto your skin. Right after, the potatoes, because everything needs time to soften. The goat goes in last, after the bouillon and spices, because flesh can soak up everything.

This time, she didn't have to tell me it was done. I smelled the soup and waited at attention for the call to set the table for Habeedat. It never came.

"Awa meji," so I put out two bowls, two spoons. She placed the

big pot in the middle of the table and I felt the legs shake under the weight. I stood silent before she handed me the ladle. Two scoops for her, three for me and we feasted. It tasted like every pepper soup she had ever made for me. The same amount of spice. The same amount of potatoes. The meat just as soft. As I reached for my last piece of goat, Mommy cracked a smile, “do you know why I make pepper soup in the summer?” My silence conjured up her response.

“The only thing that can fight heat, is more heat.”

I didn't know what she meant until last week, when I tried to mimic her magic. I failed. There is no goat meat in a 10 mile radius, so I settled for beef. The only peppers I could find were jalapenos, and they are more expensive than chili peppers. The potatoes crunched under my teeth. Every piece of garlic reminded me of how far I was from home.

As I dug through the soup, I pulled at each pepper, hoping the spice would paralyze my tongue with memories of home, hoping I would find familiarity in the pain. But, as I foraged through the bowl of beef and broth under the sunbeams that bled through my dorm room curtains, my tongue dug through the spices. I wasn't any closer to home, but for at least half a second, the distance didn't make my chest ache.

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About the Author

Zubaida Bello is a member of the 2019 NYC Slam Team and James Baldwin Scholar. She has performed original poetry at The Apollo, The Met, New York Live Arts, and the United Nations. Zubaida has published an article in *The African-American Point of View*, *YB Heard*, *Asterismm*, and *Chalkbeat*. Zubaida uses her poetry as an outlet for trauma, a form of activism, and to reimagine the world that she has inherited.

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