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Petina Gappah

An
Elegy for
Easterly

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An Elegy for Easterly

PETINA GAPPAN



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*For Tererai and Simbiso Gappah,
my beloved parents,
and for Regina, Ratiel, Vimbai and Vuchirai*

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More and more I have come to admire resilience.
Not the simple resistance of a pillow, whose foam
returns over and over to the same shape, but the
sinuous
tenacity of a tree: finding the light newly blocked
on one side,
it turns in another. A blind intelligence, true.
But out of such persistence arose turtles, rivers,
mitochondria, figs – all this resinous, unretractable
earth.

Jane Hirshfield, 'Optimism'

∞ The Mupandawana Dancing Champion ∞

When the prices of everything went up ninety-seven times in one year, M'dhara Vitalis Mukaro came out of retirement to make the coffins in which we buried our dead. In a space of only six months, he became famous twice over, as the best coffin maker in the district and as the Mupandawana Dancing Champion.

Fame is an elastic concept, especially in a place like this, where we all know the smells of each other's armpits. Mupandawana, full name Gutu-Mupandawana Growth Point, is bigger than a village but it is not yet a town. I have become convinced that the government calls Mupandawana a growth point merely to divert us from the reality of our present squalor with optimistic predictions about our booming future. As it is not even a townlet, a townling, or half a fraction of a town, there was much rejoicing at a recent groundbreaking ceremony for a new row of

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Blair toilets when the District Commissioner shared with us his vision for town status for Mupandawana by the year 2065. Ours is one of the biggest growth points in the country, but the only real growth is in the number of people waiting to buy coffins, and the lengthening line of youngsters waiting to board the Wabuda Wanatsa buses blasting Chimbetu songs all the way to Harare.

You will not find me joining that queue out of Mupandawana. When the Ministry despatched me here to teach at the local secondary, I was relieved to escape the headaches of Harare with its grasping women who will not let go until your wallet is empty. Mupandawana is the perfect place from which to study life, which appears to me to be no more than the punchline to a cosmic joke played by a particularly mordant being.

So I observe life, and teach geography to school-children whose only interest in my subject is knowledge of the exact distance between Mupandawana and London, Mupandawana and Johannesburg, Mupandawana and Gaborone, Mupandawana and Harare. If I cared enough, I would tell them that there is nothing there to rush for, *kumhunga hakuna ipwa*, as my late mother used to say.

But let them go, they shall find out soon enough. Mine is not a lonely life. In those moments when

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solitude quarrels with me, I enjoy the company of my two friends, Jeremiah, who teaches agriculture, and Bobojani who goes where Jeremiah goes. And then there are the Growth Pointers, as I call them, the people of Mupandawana whose lives prove my theory that life is one big jest at the expense of humanity.

Take M'dhara Vitalis, the coffin maker.

Before he retired, he worked in a furniture factory in Harare. He had been trained in the old days, M'dhara Vitalis told us on the first occasion Jeremiah, Bobojani and I drank with him. 'If the leg of one of my chairs had got you in the head, *vapfanha*, you would have woken up to tell your story in heaven,' he said. 'The President sits in one of my chairs. Real oak, *vapfanha*. I made furniture from oak, teak, mahogany, cedar, ash *chaiyo*, even Oregon pine. Not these *zhing-zhong* products from China. They may look nice and flashy but they will crack in a minute.'

On this mention of China, Bobo made a joke about the country becoming Zhim-Zhim-Zimbabwe because the ruling party had sold the country to the Chinese. Not to be outdone, Jeremiah said, 'A group of Zanu PF supporters arrives at the pearly gates. Saint Peter is greatly shocked, and goes to consult God. God says, but ruling party supporters are also my children. Saint Peter goes to fetch them, but rushes back alone shouting they've gone, they've gone. How can the

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ruling party supporters just disappear, says God. I am talking about the pearly gates, says Peter.'

We laughed, keeping our voices low because the District Commissioner was seated in the corner below the window.



M'dhara Vitalis had looked forward to setting down the tools of his trade and retiring to answer the call of the land. 'You don't know how lucky you are,' he was often heard to say to the fellows who idled around Mupandawana. 'You have no jobs so you can plough your fields.'

He had spent so much time in Harare that he appeared not to see that the rows to be ploughed were stony; when the rains came, there was no seed, and when there was seed, there were no rains. Even those like Jeremiah who liked farming so much so that they had swallowed books all the way to the agricultural college at Chibhero had turned their backs on the land, in Jeremiah's case, by choosing to teach the theory of farming to children who, given even an eighth of a chance, would sooner choose the lowliest messenger jobs in the cities than a life of tilling the land.

M'dhara Vitalis was forced to retire three years earlier than anticipated. His employer told him that the company was shutting down because they could

∞ *The Mupandawana Dancing Champion* ∞

not afford the foreign currency. There would not be money for a pension, he was told, the money had been invested in a bank whose directors had run off with it *kwazvakarehwa* to England. He had been allowed to keep his overalls, and had been given some of the tools that he had used in the factory. And because the owner was also closing down another factory, one that manufactured shoes, M'dhara Vitalis and all the other employees were each given three pairs of shoes.

Jeremiah, Bobo and I saw him as he got off the Wabuda Wanatsa bus from Harare. 'Thirty years, *vakomana*,' he said to us, as he shook his head. 'You work thirty years for one company and this is what you get. *Shuwa, shuwa, pension yebhutsu. Heh?* Shoes, instead of a pension. Shoes. These, these . . .'

The words caught in his throat.

'*Ende futi dzinoshinya*, all the pairs are half a size too small for me,' he added when he had recovered his voice. We commiserated with him as best we could. We poured out all the feeling contained in our hearts.

'Sorry, M'dhara,' I said.

'Rough, M'dhara,' said Jeremiah.

'Tight,' said Bobojani.

We watched him walk off carefully in his snug-fitting shoes, the plastic bag with the other two pairs dangling from his left hand.

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‘Pension *yebhutsu*,’ Jeremiah said, and, even as we pitied him, we laughed until tears ran down Jeremiah’s cheeks and we had to pick Bobojani off the ground.

For all that he did not have a real pension, M’dhara Vitalis was happy to retire. Some three kilometres from the growth point was the homestead that he had built with money earned from the factory, with three fields for shifting cultivation. Between them, he and his wife managed well enough, somehow making do until the drought came in two consecutive years and inflation zoomed and soared and spun the roof off the country. M’dhara Vitalis went back to Harare to look for another job, but who wanted an old man like him when there were millions unemployed? He looked around Mupandawana and was fortunate to find work making coffins. M’dhara Vitalis was so efficient that he made a small contribution to the country’s rising unemployment – his employer found it convenient to fire two other carpenters. And that was how he became known as the coffin maker with the nimblest fingers this side of the Great Dyke.



We had seen his hands at work, but of his nimble feet and his acrobatics on the dance floors of Harare, we had only heard. As the person who told us these sto-

∞ *The Mupandawana Dancing Champion* ∞

ries was the man himself, there was reason to believe that he spoke as one who ululated in his own praise. As Jeremiah said, ‘There is too much seasoning in M’dhara Vita’s stories.’

All his exploits seemed to have taken place in the full glare of the public light. ‘I danced at Copacabana, Job’s Night Spot and the Aquatic Complex. There is one night I will never forget when I danced at Mushandirapamwe and the floor cleared of dancers. All that the people could do was to stand and watch. *Vakamira ho-o,*’ he told us. We laughed into our beers, Jeremiah, Bobojani and I, but, as we soon came to see, we laughed too much and we laughed too soon.

M’dhara Vita’s employer was the Member of Parliament for our area. As befitting such a man of the people, the Honourable had a stake in the two most thriving enterprises in the growth point, so that the profits from Kurwiragono Investments t/a No Matter Funeral Parlour and Coffin Suppliers accumulated interest in the same bank account as those from Kurwiragono Investments t/a Why Leave Guesthouse and Disco-Bar. And being one on whom fortune had smiled, our Honourable could naturally not confine his prosperous seed to only one woman. Why Leave was managed by Felicitas, the Honourable’s fourth wife, a generous sort who had done her bit to make a



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good number of men happy before she settled into relative domesticity with the Honourable. As one of those happy men, I retained very fond memories of her, and often stepped into the Guesthouse for a drink and to pass the time. She always had an eye out for the next chance, Felicitas, which is how she came to replace me with the Honourable, and she decided that what the bar needed was a dancing competition.



The first I knew of it was not from Felicitas herself, but when I saw groups of dust-covered schoolchildren at break time dancing the *kongonya*. Now, the sexually suggestive *kongonya* is the dance of choice at ruling party gatherings, so that I thought that they must be practising for a visit from yet another dignitary. Later that evening as I passed the Guesthouse I saw another crowd of children dancing the *kongonya*, while another pointed to the wall of the building. Intrigued by this random outbreak of *kongonya* in the youth of Mupandawana, I approached the Guesthouse. The youngsters scattered on my approach, and I saw that they had been admiring a poster on which was portrayed the silhouette outline of a couple captured in mid-dance. The man's back was bent so far that his head almost touched the ground, while his female partner, of a voluptuousness that put me in mind of Felicitas, had her hands on her knees with her bottom almost touching the ground.

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Below this enraptured couple were the words:

 *Why Leave Guesthouse and Disco-Bar in association
with Mupandawana District Development Council is
proud to present the search for the:* 

*Mupandawana
Dancing
Champion*

 *Join us for a night of celebration and dancing!
One Night Only!!* 

Details followed of the competition to be held a fortnight from then, and the main prizes to be won, the most notable of which was one drink on the house once a week for three months.

Mupandawana is a place of few new public pleasures. In the following two weeks, the excitement escalated and reached a pitch on the night itself. In their cheap and cheerful clothes, Mupandawana's highest and lowest gathered in the main room of the Why Leave Guesthouse and poured out into the night: the lone doctor doing penance at the district hospital, the nurses, the teachers, the security guards, the storekeeper from Chawawanaidyanehama Cash and Carry and his two giggling girl assistants, the District Commissioner in all his frowning majesty, the policemen from the camp, a few soldiers, the

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people from the nearby and outlying villages.

Tapping feet and impatient twitches and shakes showed that the people were itching to get started, and when Felicitas turned on the music, they needed no further encouragement. The music thumped into the room, the Bhundu Boys, Alick Macheso and the Orchestra Mberikwazvo, Andy Brown and Storm, System Tazvida and the Chazezesa Challengers, Cephas ‘Motomuzhinji’ Mashakada and Muddy Face, Hosiah Chipanga and Broadway Sounds, Mai Charamba and the Fishers of Men, Simon ‘Chopper’ Chimbetu and the Orchestra Dendera Kings, Tongai ‘Dehwa’ Moyo and Utakataka Express, and, as no occasion could be complete without him, Oliver ‘Tuku’ Mtukudzi and the Black Spirits. They sang out their celebratory anthems of life gone right; they sang out their woeful, but still danceable, laments of things gone wrong. And to all these danced the Growth Pointers, policeman and teacher, nurse and villager, man and woman, young and old. There was *kongonya*, more *kongonya*, and naturally more *kongonya* – ruling party supporters in Mupandawana are spread as thickly as the rust on the ancient Peugeot 504 that the Honourable’s son crashed and abandoned at Sadza Growth Point. Bobojani was in there with the best of them, shuffling a foot away from the District Commissioner, while Jeremiah and I watched from the bar.

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The Growth Pointers did themselves proud. The security guard who stood watch outside the Building Society danced the Borrowdale even better than Alick Macheso, its inventor. Dzinganisayi, widely considered to be the Secretary-General of the Mupandawana branch of ZATO (aka the Zimbabwe Association of Thieves' Organisations) proved to be as talented on the dance floor as he was in making both attended and unattended objects vanish. Nyengeterayi from Chawawanaidyanehama Cash and Carry got down on hands and knees and improvised a dance that endangered her fingers, given the stomping, dancing feet around her.

And who knew that the new fashion and fabrics teacher could move her hips like that? As I watched her gyrate to Tuku, a stirring arose in my loins, and I began to reconsider the benefits of long-term companionship.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw M'dhara Vita enter the room.

He was dressed in a suit that declared its vintage as circa 1970s. The trouser legs were flared, while the beltline that must have once hugged his hips and waist was rolled up and tied around his waistline with an old tie. The jacket had two vents at the back. He wore a bright green shirt with the collar covering that of his jacket. On his head was a hat of the kind

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worn by men of his age, but his was set at a rakish angle, almost covering one eye. And on his feet were one-third of his pension.

‘*Ko, Michael Jacksonka,*’ Jeremiah said as we nudged each other.

M’dhara Vitalis gave us a casual nod as, showing no signs of painful feet, he walked slowly to the dance floor.

And then he danced.

The security guard’s Borrowdale became a Mbaresdale. Dzinganisayi’s movements proved to be those of a rank amateur. Nyengeterayi’s innovations were revealed to be no more than the shallow ambitions of callow youth. M’dhara Vitalis danced them off the floor to the sidelines where they stood to watch with the rest of us. He knew all the latest dances, and the oldest too. We gaped at his reebok and his water pump. He stunned us with his running man. He killed us with his robot. And his snake dance and his break-dance made us stand and say *ho-o*. His moonwalk would have made Michael himself stand and say *ho-o*. The floor cleared, until only he and the fashion and fabrics teacher were dancing.

M’dhara Vitalis was here. The teacher was there.

The teacher was here. M’dhara Vitalis was there.

M’dhara Vitalis moved his hips. The teacher moved her waist.

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M'dhara Vitalis moved his neck and head.

The teacher did a complicated twirl with her arms.

M'dhara Vitalis did some fancy footwork, *mapantsula* style.

The teacher lifted her right leg off the ground and shook her right buttock.

And then Felicitas put on Chamunorwa Nebeta and the Glare Express. As the first strains of *Tambai Mese Mujairirane* filled the room, we saw M'dhara Vitalis transformed. He wriggled his hips. He closed his eyes and whistled. He turned his back to us and used the vent in the back of the jacket to expose his bottom as he said, '*Pesu, pesu,*' moving the jacket first to one side and then to the other.

'Watch that waist,' I said to Jeremiah.

'*Chovha George!*' said the District Commissioner.

'If only I was a woman,' said Jeremiah.

That last dance sealed it, the fashion and fabrics teacher conceded the floor. By popular acclaim, M'dhara Vita was crowned Mupandawana Dancing Champion. It was a night that Mupandawana would not forget.



This was just as well because the one-night-only threat of the poster came true in a way that Felicitas had not anticipated. Two days after M'dhara Vita's

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triumph, the Governor of our province summoned our Honourable MP to his office in Masvingo. A bright young spark, one of the countless army of men who are paid to get offended on behalf of the ruling party, had taken a careful look at the poster and noticed that the first letters of the words Mupandawana Dancing Champion spelled out the acronym of the opposition party, the unmentionable Movement for Democratic Change. Naturally, this had to be conveyed to the appropriate channels.

‘What business does a ruling party MP have in promoting the opposition, the puppets, those led by tea boys, the detractors who do not understand that the land is the economy and the economy is the land and that the country will never be a colony again, those who seek to reverse the consolidation of the gains of our liberation struggle,’ so said the Governor, shaking with rage. I only knew that he shook with rage because Felicitas said he did, and she only knew because the Honourable told her so.

The upshot of this was that there were no more dance competitions, and M’dhara Vita the coffin maker remained the undefeated dancing champion of our growth point. He took his a one-drink-a-week prize for what it was worth, insisting on a half-bottle of undiluted Château brandy every Friday evening. ‘Why can’t he drink Chibuku like a normal man his

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age?’ Felicitas asked, with rather bad grace, to which I responded that if he had been a normal man of his age, he would not have been the dancer he was.

To appreciate his skill is to understand that he was an old man. They had no birth certificates in the days when he was born, or at least none for people born in the rural areas, so that when he trained as a carpenter at Bondolfi and needed a pass to work in the towns, his mother had estimated his age by trying to recall how old he was when the mission school four kilometres from his village had been built. As befitting one who followed in the professional footsteps of the world’s most famous carpenter, he had chosen 25 December as his birthday, so that his age was a random selection and he could well have been older than his official years. What was beyond dispute was that he danced in defiance of the wrinkles around his eyes.

Even if he had not got his drinks on the house, many of us would have bought him, if not his favourite brandy, then a less expensive alternative. There were no competitions and no more posters, but we began to gather at the Guesthouse every Friday evening to watch M’dhara Vita. Fuelled on by the bottom-of-the-barrel brandy and the *museve* music, his gymnastics added colour to our grey Fridays.

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It was no different on that last Friday.

‘Boys, boys,’ he said as he approached the bar where I stood with Bobojani, Jeremiah and a group of other drinkers.

‘*Ndeipi M’dhara*,’ Jeremiah greeted him in the casual way that we talked to him; none of that respect-for-the-elders routine with M’dhara Vita. He cracked a joke at our expense, and we gave it right back to him, he knocked back his drink, and proceeded to the dance floor. Felicitas had come to understand that it was the Congolese rumba that demanded agile waists and rubber legs that really got him moving. So on that night, the Lumumbashi Stars blasted out of the stereo as M’dhara Vitalis took centre stage. He stood a while, as though to let the brandy and the music move its way through his ears and mouth to his brain and pelvis. Then he ground his hips in time to the rumba, all the while his eyes closed, and his arms stretched out in front of him.

‘*Ichi chimudhara chirambakusakara*,’ whistled Jeremiah, echoing the generally held view that M’dhara Vitalis was in possession of a secret elixir of youth.

‘I am Vitalis, shortcut Vita, *ilizwo lami ngi*Vitalis, danger *basopo*. *Waya waya waya waya!*’ He got down to the ground, rolled and shook. We crowded around him, relishing this new dance that we had not seen

∞ *The Mupandawana Dancing Champion* ∞

before. He twitched to the right, and to the left. The music was loud as we egged him on. He convulsed in response to our cheering. His face shone, and he looked to us as if to say, 'Clap harder.'

And we did.

It was only when the song ended and we gave him a rousing ovation and still he did not get up that we realised that he would never get up, and that he had not been dancing, but dying.



As M'dhara Vitalis left Why Leave feet first, it was up to Bobojani, with his usual eloquence, to provide a fitting commentary on the evening's unexpected event.

'Tight,' he said.

There was not much to add after that.

We buried him in one of the last coffins he ever made. I don't know whether he would have appreciated that particular irony. I am sure, though, that he would have appreciated making the front page of the one and only national daily newspaper.

The story of his death appeared right under the daily picture of the President. If you folded the newspaper three-quarters of the way to hide the story in which was made the sunny prediction that inflation was set to go down to two million, seven hundred

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and fifty-seven per cent by year end, all you saw was the story about M'dhara Vita. They wrote his name as Fidelis instead of Vitalis, and called him a pensioner when he hadn't got a pension; unless, of course, you counted those three pairs of shoes.

Still, the headline was correct.

'Man Dances Self to Death.'

That, after all, is just what he did.