



Writing | Symposium 2021

Chest Pain

By Vongai Mlambo

Four chambers housed in powerful muscular contractions. The top two squeeze tentatively, the bottom leap through the chest eagerly. All of them co-ordinate from the first, tear-laced intake of stale, over-chlorinated hospital breath until the day that air is recycled, never to re-enter the throat where stories are born, and the seed of your resonant laughter germinates.

I never suspected that the aberrant rumble of your war-tattooed chest is how I would lose you. A beating heart. A beating heart is all a body should need. The diagnosis was Enlarged Heart Syndrome. I failed to understand why they intoned the news like they were reporting a death - I agreed vehemently. With my own wide eyes, I have watched your enlarged heart pump vigorously for family – a word you never bothered to define so that it meant everyone was covered, like universal insurance.

Lub dub to power limbs that dug soil with an oak tree handle continuous with the bark of your sand-papered skin. *Lub dub* to accelerate the oxygen delivery required to toss Coca-Cola crates from the dusty trunk of a Toyota Hilux. The merchandise landed gently on the shelves, guided by the practiced sturdiness of your bare hands. *Luuub duuub* as the moon eclipsed the sun your heart slowed but did not stop as you whispered to me over the phone that hard work was the secret to success as well as a lot of Faith in God.

I can still smell the grief on Mama's lips as she tried to explain that you were drowning in the fluids of your enlarged heart. The doctor had told her *sekuru's* body could no longer handle such a dysfunctional engine. I interrupted, nearly yelled that his diagnosis made no sense – that engine had always powered his life, one he so generously shared.

I can no longer sit through the anatomy of the heart. Listen to them extol sinews of tendons and tendrils of nerves. I cannot contemplate memorizing the structures that failed in you but continued to work in everyone else. The worst part is knowing that *sekuru* blamed himself. He couldn't command his heart to do the additional work that would keep him alive. *Sekuru*, rest knowing that for once, that labor was not yours to fulfill. It was ours.

Vongai is from Zimbabwe and is a first year medical student. In her work, Vongai brings attention to the humanity in illness and tells childhood stories that invoke her familial and national culture. She has published poetry and short stories in Airport Road, an NYU journal of creative works. Any free time is used to host outdoor picnics, drink too much tea, craft new slam poetry and paint by numbers.