

# Forest, Empty

a play by

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## Rules of the Play

### Characters

FWELA	20s	<i>A disheveled Errol Flynn from a 30s adventure story. Pathological liar, but earnest in intent. Suffers malarial hallucinations.</i>
MAZUNGUS	60s	<i>A contemporary southern senator. Has a great white mustache and white hair. An orator. Deft with words, forceful.</i>
LENNA	50s	<i>A hip, almost ageless grandmother from the 60s. Ethnically ambiguous, but identifies as Black American. Wears gardening gloves. A poetess.</i>
NDUGU	20s	<i>A contemporary black teenager. Wears a black hooded sweatshirt, dark jeans, sneakers. Participates when he has to. A hip-hop artist.</i>
STARR	40s	<i>A contemporary academic. She observes as an anthropological/historical experiment. She may begin watching from the periphery, but eventually may enter the space and examine things more directly.</i>
“PYGMY”	??	<i>A roughly four foot tall plaster cast of a young adult male. His arms and legs articulate, but the object is essentially a statue.</i>

### Setting

*Standing tall, erect, but randomly throughout an otherwise empty space are 15 or so looming white tree trunks, roughly the width of a mason jar. They can be removed and moved around at will. The back wall is exposed, if possible.*

### Media

*Simply put, the narrative should eventually overtake the history:*

**Projections** should evolve from simple, localized and instructional in nature to space-filling and abstract as the play progresses.

**Sound** (including the TAPE VOICE) should also evolve from a localized, single-source, 1970's instructional tape-type style into something more enveloping, abstract and visceral as the play progresses.

**Projected on the back wall of the space:**

**“O May I join the choir invisible  
Of those immortal dead who live again  
In minds made better by their presence”**

*Lights up.*

**Projection fades.**

*A woman, STARR, enters with a cup of coffee and a notepad.*

*As she passes the center of the space, she draws a small chalk ‘X’ on the floor.*

*She walks to the periphery of the space and sits in a chair.*

*She opens the note pad and jots a few things down whilst examining her surroundings (including the audience).*

*Immediately next to her is a media cart with a few things: an old tape recorder, some books, a microphone, and a stuffed orangutan.*

*Starr pushes play. The tape hisses for a moment, then a melodic chime introduces a warm, detached voice.*

**TAPE VOICE**

Welcome.

This is a recording.

It will help guide you.

**Projection: (the forest)**

**Sound: poor quality anthropological recording of Mbuti Village**

**TAPE VOICE**

And this - is the forest.

The sounds and images will provide an aid for your imagination.

Some ambiance, perhaps.

Or some atmosphere.

**Projection and sound abruptly ceases.**

*Perhaps the house lights briefly illuminate.*

TAPE VOICE

Though, to be clear,  
it is not an *actual* forest.

**Projection: (\*disclaimer: not an actual forest)**

*After a moment, silhouettes of four figures appear against the back wall.*

TAPE VOICE

Here are four, very different characters.  
They are here to make an offering.

**Projection: (fwela : the storyteller)**

*As if on cue, FWELA enters into light, carrying a small plaster cast of what looks to be a boy on his back. He stands the plaster cast down directly on top of the chalk 'X,' and steps to the side.*

TAPE VOICE

These characters are composites.

**Projection: (mazungus : the white land)**

*Next, MAZUNGUS steps forward. He takes a small piece of charcoal from his pocket, then draws sharp little teeth on the plaster figure. He steps to the side.*

TAPE VOICE

They are not real.

**Projection: (lenna : the water)**

*LENNA steps forward. She takes a small photo from her pocket, examines the plaster cast, then positions the cast to look like the figure in the photo by crossing its arms. She steps to the side.*

### TAPE VOICE

Though parts of them are very real.

#### **Projection: (ndugu : the bloodline)**

*NDUGU walks directly up to Starr, surprising her. He takes the coffee cup from her hand, drinks what's left, then sets the empty coffee cup at the plaster figure's feet.*

*He takes a blunt from his pocket, lights it, then sets it in the cup like incense. Steps to the side.*

### TAPE VOICE

Finally, this -

here in the middle -

is a plaster cast.

It will take the place

of one who is no longer with us.

And only these four characters

know the truth of his name.

#### **Projection: (forest, empty)**

### TAPE VOICE

This is not a biography.

It is, more accurately, a *mythology*.

A tapestry created much like all mythologies:

sewn for the purpose of edification, education and, ultimately, posterity.

So that we may never repeat our mistakes again.

NDUGU

Hmf.

Yeah, right.

Ndugu takes the blunt back, puts it in his mouth, brings the coffee cup back to Starr, then sits on the perimeter with his hood down.

**Sound: Tape emits a chime.**

TAPE VOICE

Please turn to side two.

*Starr turns the tape over.*

*Lights shift.*

**Projection: (the congo)**

**Sound: forest sounds return**

LENNA

The Congo.

*Lenna sits on the floor, facing the projected images in reverence.*

*She begins to hum something, perhaps something she heard as a child.*

Fwela strides forward, looking out over the audience.

FWELA

*(seeing it again for the first time)*

The rivers, rocks and sun all combine  
to write an indelible impression upon the mind.

LENNA

*This is where it must always begin.*

*Starr pushes play.*

TAPE VOICE

Side two.

A Complete History of the Belgian Occupation of the Congo: Volume I.

MAZUNGUS

Well, dammit.

If I had known we were here for a history lesson,  
I would have brought a chair.

*He settles in and sits against the back wall,  
facing away from the projection, attempting  
to get comfortable.*

LENNA

You *know* why we are here.

We cannot resist the flow of the rushing river.

MAZUNGUS

Hmf. Only *some* of us would sink like stones.

**Projection: a map of western Africa without political borders**

TAPE VOICE

The Congo is an area of Western Africa thought to be inhabited  
by early humans as long as 80,000 years ago.

**Projection: photos w/captions of the Ishango Bone and Semliki Harpoon**

FWELA

*(still fixated)*

Have I ever told you of my adventures in the Congo?

MAZUNGUS

Only one hundred times before.

TAPE VOICE

Artifacts from early Congolese settlements coincide  
with the civilization of the Efe Pygmies,

**Projection: grainy, distant photos of Congolese pygmies**

MAZUNGUS

*(he scoffs)*

Civilization!

TAPE VOICE

A people which have been shown by mitochondrial dNA analyses  
to be one of the oldest races still existing on earth.

**Projection: an old map of the Congo River**  
**Sound: fade in rushing river**

FWELA

Collectors from all over the world would pick through my boat  
as if it were a floating Smithsonian.

TAPE VOICE

The area itself is fed by the second largest river in the world.

## LENNA

The four serpents, winding their way to the very life-giving roots.

## TAPE VOICE

And as a result, The Congo is extraordinarily rich  
in indigenous natural resources,  
including some of the most sought after raw materials  
of the twentieth century.

**Projection: photos of mining operations, deforestation, then eventually contemporary products which use the raw materials**

## FWELA

A shimmering lifeline, an artery pumping through the heart of creation.

## TAPE VOICE

Some of the most coveted resources include rubber --

*Mazungus, agitated, abruptly stands.*

*He walks toward Starr.*

## MAZUNGUS

*(simultaneously)*

Ma'am. Ma'am?

I would very much like to illustrate my value in this forum  
by answering any queries you might have  
concerning these dull historical topics

## TAPE VOICE

*(simultaneously)*

-- cobalt, copper, niobium, tantalum, industrial and gem diamonds,

gold, silver, zinc, manganese, tin, uranium, coal as well as petrol and timber.

### TAPE VOICE

End, side two.

*The tape clicks.*

*Starr begins to switch the tape, but her attention is interrupted.*

*Fwela has uprooted one of the trees. He lays it on the ground in front of him.*

### FWELA

*(with drama)*

I was a young shepherd of only twenty,  
looking to make my mark as a missionary,  
when I traveled deep into the very darkest regions of the Congo.

### MAZUNGUS

*(uninterested)*

I'm just gonna borrow this for a while.

*Mazungus takes a newspaper from Starr's cart, then heads upstage again to read.*

### FWELA

*(ignoring)*

Like the great explorers before me,  
I would seek no less  
than the most extraordinary places on this Earth.

### MAZUNGUS

You were a *missionary*, son.

FWELA

A missionary with a *mission*.

A crusade,

from the seminaries of Carolina

to the tributaries of the great Kasai.

A world away.

*Fwela steps up onto the fallen tree trunk,  
and prepares himself for the jungle:  
removes his hat, rolls up his sleeves, cuffs -  
drinks a bit of water.*

**Sound: a single mosquito buzzing**

FWELA

The journey itself, I must tell you, is one of *great* peril.

To simply survive the sheer density of the jungle,

a man must steel himself against this --

**Sound: a few mosquitos**

*Starr looks around for the mosquitos.*

FWELA

Against this *curse*.

*Fwela, absent-mindedly, begins to swat at  
the air while speaking.*

FWELA

And so, I travel far -

*far* up that raging river

to a place only found in storybooks.

MAZUNGUS

*(still reading)*

Clipped straight from Crusoe, I'll bet.

FWELA

*(ignoring)*

I look,

and as the heavy morning mists begin unclasp their heavy hands and part,  
a glint of jade sparkles across the great river valley in the distance.

And I see it.

For the very first time.

LENNA

What is it that you see, child?

FWELA

The Kuba Kingdom.

*Fwela kneels.*

FWELA

The king himself honors me.

I am a reincarnation of one of their own.

*Lenna begins to pantomime a coronation in silhouette.*

MAZUNGUS

Hold on, now!

*She stops.*

MAZUNGUS

Get it straight.

(to Fwela)

They honored that colored Christian colleague of yours.

Not you.

*Fwela stops, thinks hard for a moment, then resets.*

**Sound: slowly fade in a building chorus of mosquitos**

*The ritual starts again, this time Lenna crowns Ndugu.*

FWELA

The king himself honors...*my partner*. He is a reincarnation of their own.

MAZUNGUS

That's better.

FWELA

He is black, wearing all white. I am white, wearing soiled brown.

LENNA

Then what?

*Fwela swats more.*

*Even Starr swats once or twice.*

FWELA

(becoming frantic)

I'm not sure now.

It's...*muddy* in my mind.

Viscous.

A shifting surface, like --

*Lenna touches his shoulder.*

**Sound: mosquitos suddenly cease.**

LENNA

Train your thoughts, now.

*Starr notes this.*

*Lenna redirects Fwela's attention to the lonely plaster figure in the center of the space.*

LENNA

The Kingdom of the Kuba.

Is that where you met *him*?

FWELA

*(lost now, seeing things)*

These people - they are...

Like us.

Intelligent. Complex.

Running commerce through the heart of the Congo.

**Sound: distant drums**

FWELA

They show us their ways. Speak of their own Gods.

They talk of prophesies. Prophesies unfulfilled.

*(a revelation)*

And we.

We come to save them from the Great Belgian Lion and his death-dealers.

Botofe bo le iwa.

LENNA

Look at me, child.

What about him?

*Again, she points to the plaster cast.*

**Sound: the chorus of mosquitos is now joined by a rushing river.**

FWELA

Botofe bo le iwa!

*Starr is startled and looks up for instruction.*

LENNA

*(translating to Starr)*

He says "rubber is death."

*Fwela grows increasingly delirious.*

FWELA

I can feel them inside.

The fingers scratching under my skin...

LENNA

Shhh. Quiet now.

FWELA

Oh, God.

They've awoken.

LENNA

*(frustrated)*

The spirits still visit him.

MAZUNGUS

Thrilling. The Ghost of the great African Mosquito.

**Sound: mosquitos cease, river continues.**

FWELA

*(sure, intense)*

No!

No ghost.

*A King.*

The Demon of the Country.

MAZUNGUS

And he's off, ladies and gentlemen...

*In attempt to control the situation, Starr flips the tape and pushes play.*

TAPE VOICE

Side three.

A complete history of the Belgian occupation of the Congo: Volume II.

**Projection: a photo of a mosquito with a caption reading “Malaria, sometimes referred to as ‘king fever’ was caused by parasites contained in the mosquito’s saliva”**

FWELA

And though he pierces the flesh -

TAPE VOICE

Occupation and harvesting of natural resources was not without its risks in The Congo.

FWELA

He gives me *power*.

**The sound and projection begins to distort.**

TAPE VOICE

Malaria was common and widespread amongst those who decided to explore the water basin.

FWELA

He brings dreams to me.

Not always, but *always* they remain.

They will follow me twenty lifetimes from now.

TAPE VOICE

The disease, itself, consistently resulted in deadly fever, often hallucinations.

FWELA

*I am* Crusoe. *I am* Livingstone. *I am*.

*I am* the great pale Fwela.

*When I am not myself, I am him.*

MAZUNGUS

*(from upstage)*

You are no explorer, son!

You are a shell of a man.

At least attempt to tell the truth while we are bound to this place.

LENNA

(pleading with Fwela)

We cannot move forward without *you*.

*Fwela breaks away from Lenna.*

TAPE VOICE

Those inflicted most easily were --

*Fwela unexpectedly stops the tape, and begins to enact/physicalize the following:*

FWELA

These natives look to me, my pale skin glowing in the hot white sun.

I show them.

I show them the way.

I walk across the surface of the great Kasai, feet never sinking.

So many attempt to follow, but their dark legs are leaden.

The rushing current is far too fast.

And for every fleeting footprint I leave on the surface of the river waves,

their bodies, like lemmings, drown

one by one

in the darkest water.

And I cannot save them.

I hear only their names echoing through the valley

as they disappear from sight:

Maloba, Tumba, Kelala, Mukebba, Chibwola, Kabwodi.

(beat)

Kassongo.

(beat)

Centuries of elephant bones curve upwards to catch their sinking,  
drifting corpses.

A swaying graveyard below me.

*He sways, almost falling over.*

*Ndugu, nearby, catches him.*

NDUGU

Yo!

FWELA

*(full hallucination)*

Kassongo!

I am glad you are here, my friend.

NDUGU

Nah, man. You got the wrong brother.

FWELA

I should not have let you die in that river like the others.

*Mazungus stands in protest.*

MAZUNGUS

Have we not heard enough about this cesspool of a country?

*Lenna kneels down by Fwela's side,  
relieving Ndugu.*

LENNA

*(insistant)*

He is not the boy that we are here to remember.

*(pointing to plaster cast)*

That is not *his* name.

Kassongo, the boy of which *you* speak,

traveled across the sea with you and eventually took the cloth.

Remember?

He drowned in Birmingham -

caught in a river of stampeding protesters -

far, far away from his home.

**Sound: all sounds cease.**

*Fwela snaps out of it, looking at Lenna.*

*She wipes his brow with a wash cloth.*

## FWELA

On that river, then and there - my youth dried up.

My boyhood ended forever.

I grew old.

## LENNA

Truth feels like that sometimes.

*Fwela struggles to stand.*

## MAZUNGUS

We have a task at hand,

and you -

you're still just a sick child tryin' to impress your papa.

Tryin' to impress him and everyone else with tales of poison darts,

deep, dark forests,

and precious little pygmies,

isn't that right?

FWELA

They're *not* stories.

MAZUNGUS

No?

What about those cannibals o' yours?

*Starr, curious, picks up a book and starts paging through it.*

MAZUNGUS

*(to Starr)*

You'll find them right along side his accolade by the Queen  
and voyage to the moon.

Real flair for fantasy, this one has.

LENNA

*(to Mazungus)*

It's true that this man is not well.

But each deserves their chance to paint in the missing colors.

*Mazungus walks up to the small plaster cast and places it directly next to Fwela.*

MAZUNGUS

Well, his colors aren't natural.

I, on the other hand, intend on painting things *accurately*.

NDUGU

Man, y'all so full o'shit.

MAZUNGUS

Oh, you'll get yours just the same.

But right now, he *will* answer for his crimes.

All of us will.

(*to Fwela*)

Your crimes will be remembered just as mine have.

Fair's fair, you see.

*Mazungus begins to uproot two of the trees, placing them, erect, on either side of the plaster figure. Ndugu helps.*

*Lenna, similarly, removes two lengths of rope from the waist of her dress, tying the little plaster arms to the trees.*

FWELA

(*to Lenna*)

Wait --

LENNA

(*apologizing*)

Always *someone* must scribe the great song into the vast white pages.

NDUGU

(*to Starr*)

Huh.

Then how come the one holding the black ink always be white?

*Starr looks up, stops writing for a moment.*

*The characters finish putting the plaster figure on display.*

*They finally look to Fwela, who is frozen.*

MAZUNGUS

Now.

Let's out with it.

How'd ya meet'im, son?

LENNA

*(affirming)*

Go on, now.

*Fwela thinks hard, takes a deep breath.*

FWELA

I was -

I was traveling beyond the Devil's Cauldron  
on to the wider reaches - near the sea.

And -

**Sound: generic/cliche tribal village sounds**

FWELA

*(the storyteller returns)*

It was there I came across the most carnivorous of cannibals.

And they had, in a giant pot of water - ready to be boiled, my friend --

MAZUNGUS

False!

**Sound: sounds cease**

LENNA

*(gently)*

Try again.

FWELA

*(trying harder)*

I was traveling beyond the Devil's Cauldron

on to the the wider reaches near the sea --

**Sound: dramatic movie music, then splashing**

FWELA

*(unable to help himself)*

When I saw the creature with my very own eyes!

Poised and ready to consume my --

MAZUNGUS

False again!

**Sound: sounds cease**

LENNA

*(a mother)*

Come, now.

The *truth*.

*Fwela takes a moment. Looks at the figure. Then tries one more time.*

FWELA

*(everything he has)*

The second time I traveled to the Congo, I --

*(he remembers)*

I was broke. Penniless.

MAZUNGUS

Finally!

LENNA

Let's move on.

*Starr pushes play on the tape recorder.*

**Projection: (a slave auction)**

**Sound: shouts in many languages, the sounds of animals, etc.**

TAPE VOICE

Despite the extreme risk of disease and, commonly, death, Belgians, British, French and Americans would boldly seek their fortune by buying and selling local wares, which included artifacts, textiles And often native Africans.

Here, the slave trade flourished.

LENNA

Maafa. The great disaster.

*The characters begin to reenact.*

*Fwela stands next to the plaster figure.  
Mazungus stands behind.*

*Lenna and Ndugu hold tight the ropes  
around the little figures arms.*

**Sound: the crack of a whip, a scream**

FWELA

Oh, God. Those sounds.

MAZUNGUS

*(with exuberance)*

How do they make you feel?

FWELA

Coarse, like burlap.

LENNA

Deflated, like being crushed under stone.

NDUGU

Fuckin' irritated,  
like we missin' the whole point.

MAZUNGUS

Wrong!

This is *precisely* the point!  
Are you unable feel the excitement?  
The thrill of the sale?  
There is nothing quite like it.

*Fwela seems frozen, shocked by the actual memory.*

LENNA

You're doing just fine, now.  
Tell us why you were there.

FWELA

*(ashamed)*

Money.  
And a mission.  
*I was...hunting.*

LENNA

Hunting what?

MAZUNGUS

(*touché*)

Let him color it the way he wishes.

**Sound: the environment suddenly becomes overwhelming in scope and volume**

FWELA

(*shouting over the noise*)

Before I even make my way a mile up the Kasai,  
I stumble upon a European naval outpost.

*Mazungus steps forward to present the plaster figure.*

MAZUNGUS

(*as slave trader*)

Il coûte deux cent!

LENNA

(*translating*)

The cost is two hundred!

*Fwela steps forward, pulling out a marked length of fabric, measuring the figure's height, etc.*

FWELA

The slave trade is such that a man gets used to --

no, not used to --

made *numb* by the measuring of another human for the sake of sale.

MAZUNGUS

Deux cent!

FWELA

I glaze over.

I have my orders.

MAZUNGUS

Deux cent!

FWELA

They have in their possession a dwarf, they say.

One that they have rescued from a dangerous tribe in the East.

MAZUNGUS

Monsieur, êtes-vous intéressé?

FWELA

Je paierai avec seulement ce que j'ai.

LENNA

(translating)

I'll pay only what I have.

*Fwela takes out a small bolt of fabric and equally small bag of salt.*

*They make the exchange.*

*The slave trader is not happy, but accepts the payment.*

MAZUNGUS

Prenez-le, il est inutile de me.

LENNA

(translating)

Take him. He's useless to me anyway.

*Ndugu and Lenna release the plaster figure's arms.*

*Fwela kneels beside him to take his hand. He examines it, remembering, for a moment, their first meeting.*

FWELA

So small.

I would very often underestimate him.

LENNA

Most did.

FWELA

And so *young*, perhaps only twenty --

LENNA

(correcting)

Are you sure about that?

FWELA

Younger.

Only fifteen or sixteen.

MAZUNGUS

So, you purchased a dwarf child from the Navy.

Livingstone's got nothing on you.

FWELA

*(an admission)*

I am no adventurer. The old man is right.

I am a missionary charged with -

*another* man's mission.

I could not have saved him from the cannibals of the Congo.

I would have become stew myself.

LENNA

*(earnest)*

*Good.*

MAZUNGUS

A scavenger, then.

FWELA

*(not disagreeing)*

The very least of what I have, that is what I pay for him:

a bolt of fabric and a bag of salt.

MAZUNGUS

Well, I certainly can appreciate the value in it.

*Fwela touches the face of the plaster cast.*

NDUGU

*(to Fwela)*

You paid more'n salt.

**Projection: (fwela and the pygmy go to the deep, dark forest)**

**Sound: an eruption of an Mbuti elephant hunting song**

*Starr is confused. She did not push play.*

*She looks around for the source of the sounds and images.*

*Fwela suddenly leaps into a fever dream upon hearing the music.*

Fwela grabs the plaster figure and pulls him into the shadows. He darts between trees, looking for something.

### FWELA

Those songs!

Where are we going?

### MAZUNGUS

Good Lord!

Will somebody stop him?

*No one does.*

### NDUGU

Cain't do *nuthin'*.

Power'a dat beat.

### FWELA

Those songs keep drawing us into the black.

Haunting songs in the haunting pitch of the deep, deep green.

*Fwela mimics the voices.*

### LENNA

The ink from one thousand pages  
could not give their song the proper melody.

FWELA

What.

What are they *saying*?

**Projected: pixilated, almost illegible silhouettes of pygmies dancing**

*Mazungus this time - in order to get things back on track - presses play on the tape recorder.*

*The line between history and story continues to fade.*

TAPE VOICE

Side three.

A complete history of the Belgian occupation of the Congo: Volume III.

FWELA

This forest is like a day-long dream.

*Fwela looks up to the canopy, remembering the deep forest.*

TAPE VOICE

The word “genocide” had not yet been adopted at the turn of the century, so King Leopold’s atrocities and subsequent slaughter of the Congolese were recorded without the drama of definition.

MAZUNGUS

*(to Fwela)*

You hear that, boy?

You ain’t ever going back to that place.

## TAPE VOICE

With conservative estimates reaching over 2 million dead  
and less conservative estimations ballooning to over 15 million.

*Fwela is nearly possessed by the voices.*

*He leans, exhausted, against a tree.*

*He squeezes a washcloth over his brow.*

## MAZUNGUS

That place is as good as gone.

*Fwela sets the figure down and talks directly to it.*

## FWELA

My friend.

## MAZUNGUS

Don't ignore me, boy!  
You're just an employee.

## FWELA

*(to plaster cast)*  
Tell me what they are saying.  
You can trust me.  
I must know.

*Ndugu lights up a joint, exhaling a great plume of smoke into the air.*

*The scene becomes more and more surreal.*

*Ndugu and Lenna translate the Mbuti words.*

NDUGU

*(translating)*

A village right here?

Da'sgood.

FWELA

*(understanding)*

Village here, yes...

MAZUNGUS

A soldier of fortune.

LENNA

*(translating)*

'If we make it in another place, it is just as good.'

FWELA

Village *there*, of course...

MAZUNGUS

You know exactly what to do, boy.

*Mazungus pulls a tree trunk from the ground, bracing it across to vertical trunks to make the railing of a ship.*

FWELA

*(an epiphany)*

I must bring village *with* me!

LENNA

'Come dance with me *for* forest!'

Fwela stands abruptly.

He begins to move/dance to the music throughout.

### FWELA

(*to plaster cast*)

My friend, yes!

Lord, I cannot help myself

when the moon is high and the drums drone low.

### MAZUNGUS

Time to move on, boy.

That place only exists in your mind now.

Time to move on to the sea.

*Mazungus rifles through the tapes looking for something.*

### FWELA

I understand now.

*Fwela looks at Ndugu and Lenna, referring to them as though they are within his fever dream.*

### FWELA

(*to plaster cast*)

Without you by my side,

they all run.

They are scared of me. Of us.

Their families - butchered in red

by that Bloody Belgian Lion over the red, red rubber.

I see that now.

But I am here to save them.  
All of them.  
You must tell them to trust me!

*Ndugu is suddenly angered by his story.*

NDUGU

(*to Fwela*)

You sell'm dat new life, huh?

FWELA

(*insistent, to the figure*)

Convince the others to join us across the ocean!

NDUGU

Jes get'm ta roll dat line fo'ya.

FWELA

Convince them with dancing!

LENNA

(*realizing their fate*)

And the others *do* dance.

NDUGU

After he lay that beat *down* fo'ya.

FWELA

A village to take across the blue.

NDUGU

Jes get'm ta sew dat line fo'ya.

FWELA

It will be a pilgrimage!

**Sound: a thunder clap in the distance**

NDUGU

Tell 'em!

MAZUNGUS

Ha!

*He has found the tape.*

LENNA

Crackling across the line separating water and sky,

the fever takes hold.

Like a preacher sudden struck with the word and the light.

Blue from horizon to zenith, bringing past, present and future together  
in a collision of voices.

*Mazungus pushes play.*

**Projection: (pygmies across the sea)**

**Sound: a single ship horn sounds loudly**

NDUGU

You ain't got shit ta sell.

You just a slick salesman, all you is.

*Ndugu forcibly drags Fwela behind the makeshift ship's railing. Fwela grabs the plaster cast and brings it with him.*

*Mazungus, in a huff, presses play.*

MAZUNGUS

*(assuring Fwela)*

Don't you worry, now.

TAPE VOICE

The Slave Trade in America, Volume I.

The Voyage of No Return.

MAZUNGUS

You're merely taking jungle animals  
out for some crisp sea air on an Atlantic cruise.  
You *are* saving them.

FWELA

*(suddenly seeing the ship)*

There's no salvation on a slave ship.

LENNA

Amen.

NDUGU

Good fuckin' answer.

**Projection: a horizon of sea and sky cuts across the trees**  
**Sound: fade in ocean**

TAPE VOICE

The impossibly long journey across the Atlantic was difficult for any animal.

Especially man.

Besides the horrific condition of the vessels  
in which most unfortunate souls made their way,

the length of the journey exacerbated most physical or psychological ailments present within each passenger.

FWELA

*(attempting to get his bearings)*

Where am I now?

TAPE VOICE

And even those with the most luxurious of accommodations  
were not safe from the ever-shifting currents of winds and weather,  
often changing without warning  
from calm sea  
to furious storm.

**Sound: the storm breaks.**

MAZUNGUS

There was no great storm!  
Must I be the only one to point out these fabrications?

LENNA

He still has one more truth to tell.  
How he arrives is not up to you.

FWELA

Shhhh!  
Listen.  
Do you hear?

*Fwela stares out over the water, talking to all as he grows increasingly delirious.*

FWELA

The water holds secrets.

Wait. Listen again.

Yes.

See?

The...*moaning*.

All the moaning slaves stolen from your land,  
bringing rice, rubber and diamonds to the shores of South Carolina.  
So many thrown overboard those ships.  
So much death across the blue.

LENNA

Do you remember where you are now?

FWELA

There is *something* I remember.

What is it?

Yes!

One of your people - he told me...

He told me that your forest god Tore --

MAZUNGUS

(to Lenna)

Feel free to call on me

when he wanders his way back to the subject at hand.

FWELA

Listen!

He told me that,

long ago,  
your people lived as One with the forest and its God, Tore.  
A perfect garden.

### NDUGU

Ain't no such thing.

### FWELA

No! No. Of course not. Because --  
Because nothing so pure, so sweet - could ever last.  
Yet one day,  
seeing the marvel and magic of the beautiful,  
powerful  
and divine fire that Tore held fast,  
the most clever of the pygmies -  
the *Prometheus* of the pygmies -  
swooped down on a giant bird and stole that fire from him.  
Tore, terrified in the sudden darkness, grew cataclysmic with anger.  
He erupted into the night, seeking this robber of warmth and comfort.  
But, like a shadow -  
and as only your people can -  
the thief slipped into the darkness,  
into the trees,  
nimble and forever apart.  
(beat)

*Ndugu is rapt.*

NDUGU

*(impatient)*

Well? Where dat Tore go? Where he at?

FWELA

When the furious god returned home after millennia of searching --

returned to wherever forests gods call home --

he found his mother, Matu...*dead*:

NDUGU

Aw, shit!

FWELA

Frozen without the warmth of the stolen fire.

Or perhaps heartbroken from loneliness.

*Ndugu may ad-lib reactions through the end.*

**Sound: a distant rumble**

FWELA

Tore bellowed and screamed and pounded his feet,

causing the very earth to quake.

And out of this anger he decreed that humans, too, would experience death.

They, too would experience the loss.

The loneliness. The very depths of sorrow.

Tore is, no doubt, underneath these waves right now,

cleaving through water and soul.

*That is why one can still hear the voices*

moaning beneath the waves.

*He begins to emulate the moaning that he hears below.*

LENNA

*(worried)*

Come back, now.

FWELA

Can't you hear it? It's a chorus.

They say,

'We know the blues, man.

The clear blue sky to the indigo of night.

Laboring cobalt blue, dancing, laughing and making love in midnight blue.

We wrote the blues, man - all hues of blues, man.'

Listen.

*Fwela is overwhelmed. He feels it all in an instant.*

NDUGU

*(a moment of pity)*

You all right.

You all right...

*He hands Fwela the rag to wipe his perspiring brow. He does.*

*Mazungus is fed up.*

MAZUNGUS

Go. Find. Them.

FWELA

*(an honest admission)*

Go find them.

At any cost.

That's what he says to me.

LENNA

Who?

FWELA

A letter, a list, slowly passed across that great wooden desk of his.

The only way I will be paid for my voyage.

And my pockets are so *empty*.

MAZUNGUS

*(as Fwela's employer)*

Go find me Pygmies.

FWELA

And my little friend...

he doesn't know.

MAZUNGUS

Go find me Pygmies!

At any cost.

FWELA

I teach him just enough English so that he can help me.

MAZUNGUS

*(reading the list)*

One pygmy patriarch or chief;

FWELA

But not enough to guess my true task.

MAZUNGUS

One adult woman, preferably his wife;

FWELA

*(growing agitated)*

Enough to stay at my side as I fight my sickness.

MAZUNGUS

One adult man, preferably his son;

FWELA

But not enough to understand my true affliction.

MAZUNGUS

One adult woman, the wife of the last or daughter of the first;

FWELA

He is hypnotized, seduced by my song of the west.

NDUGU

A *real* slick salesman.

FWELA

*(simultaneous)*

Selling my song of cities and buildings and signs and streets  
and carnivals and fairs and trains and people  
and people and people and people and people and people --

MAZUNGUS

*(simultaneous)*

One female youth unmarried.

Two infants.

A priestess and a priest, or medicine doctors, preferably old.

All of the above to be pygmies.

*Fwela, horrified, steal away the letter from  
Mazungus and begins to rip it up frantically.*

MAZUNGUS

You see son? You were always the one.

FWELA

Oh. No.

**Sound: a buzzsaw of mosquitos fade in**

MAZUNGUS

The executor of my plan...

NDUGU

...and executioner of this land.

FWELA

Please.

MAZUNGUS

It takes soldiers to create war, son.

And that's just what you are.

FWELA

No.

LENNA

The scythe that cuts the wheat from ground.

FWELA

No, no, no, no...

NDUGU

The man that tore his brother from his mother's arms.

FWELA

*(realizing)*

*I am Tore.*

*I am Tore!*

**Sound/Projection cease**

*The fever dream ends in an instant.*

*Lenna goes to him, quieting him along with  
Ndugu's help.*

LENNA

Hush, now.

MAZUNGUS

Shameful.

NDUGU

*(to Mazungus)*

Shut the fuck up.

'Cuz you next.

FWELA

Is this how they'll remember me?

LENNA

*(almost a lullaby)*

Shhh, shhhh.

'Cause I thought you already knew. We know the blues, all hues of blues, man.'

**Sound: The great bellow of a ship's horn sounds three times.**

*On the third:*

FWELA

*(to plaster figure)*

We're here.

**Projection: (arrival : stateside)**  
**Sound: distant ragtime music**

MAZUNGUS

Ha, ha!

LENNA

Where's that, honey?

FWELA

New Orleans.

## MAZUNGUS

Finally!

*Now we come closer.*

So much closer to our destination.

So much closer to where our little friend becomes precisely who he must be.

So much closer to the greatest, most ambitious,

most *beautiful* display that mankind has ever laid his eyes on.

Greater than those brown pyramids or that yellow wall.

Let us move *on* from this morbid fascination with the sea

and all the way up the wide-mouthed Mississippi --

## NDUGU

Hold up.

*Ndugu steps forward.*

**Projection/Sound stop abruptly**

## MAZUNGUS

What's that, son?

## NDUGU

We ain't heard enough about New Orleans.

We ain't heard enough about the music.

*(beat)*

An' don't call me 'son,' son.

## FWELA

(remembering)

What a city!

The color and sound of the Ituri forest  
replanted by the Zulu  
in that rich, deep delta.

*Fwela grabs the plaster figure's shoulders,  
attempting to get a response.*

## FWELA

It was the last place you said felt like home -  
dancing through those streets.

Isn't that right?

If you keep your eyes wide, you can see the sounds.

*Mazungus laughs.*

## MAZUNGUS

I believe it is the malaria sweat obscuring your vision, my friend.

## NDUGU

Uh-ugh. That ain't it.

*He offers a joint to Fwela.*

*Fwela holds the smoking leaf up to the light  
to look more closely.*

## NDUGU

It's dat green. It's dat bangi.

## MAZUNGUS

Now hold on a moment --

### NDUGU

Sewn, grown, incinerated and blown  
outcha mouth wit' daily weight that make a black man prone.

### MAZUNGUS

I've waited patiently for my turn, and I --

### FWELA

The only way to soften the edges  
and draw the beat of the drum through the bones.

### NDUGU

All 'bout silence when ya walkin' dat street,  
gettin' tight on dat stride when ya feelin' dat beat.

### FWELA

The little ones traverse the land,  
following the great elephant,  
And now, me - across the sea,  
leaving the seeds behind them like a trail back home.

*(he smells the air, breathing in deeply)*

The curling smoke cradles my thoughts,  
reminding me of labyrinthine teak tree roots  
underground and underfoot.

### MAZUNGUS

Bonding over narcotics.  
No wonder neither of you criminals can hold a job.

LENNA

*(scolding Ndugu)*

You see the fodder you give him?  
 Sending us backwards down the crystal stair,  
 giving him everything he needs to --

NDUGU

He ain't got shit.  
 Open y'eyes, grams.  
 Thas what he *always* do.  
 Take something that we know to be true.  
 Take something good and right that come from our land  
 and use it against us to dig us deeper in sand.  
 Shackle us, bond us  
 an' debase the old ways  
 so we keep buyin' they brand.

*(beat)*

Naw, see?

*He takes a puff.*

NDUGU

This shit go back to the forest floor.

*Ndugu walks over to Starr's cart and  
 abruptly takes the tape out of the deck.*

LENNA

Listen, child.  
 We're only here to tell his truth.  
 And --

NDUGU

Yo.

Thas *exactly* what I'm doin'!

An' befo' we hear more'a this white man burden bullshit  
 we heard a thousand times befo' -  
 we gon' lay it down at least one time  
 the way we oughtta.

They only way *he* know how.

*Ndugu takes a tape from his pocket, and puts it in the tape deck.*

NDUGU

See - little man used to say:

the way to be white -  
 the *quickest* way to be white?

Was to take the music you know right here -

*(pounds chest)*

And write it down.

Turn that shit ta stone.

Stone like buildings.

Stone like roads.

Stone like law.

Stone like they ain't gonna never gonna listen  
 to anyone that ain't them.

I ain't gonna go stone.

I'm gonna speak when it's time ta speak.

*He pushes play.*

**Projection: "improvised interlude"**  
**Sound: an old-school hip-hop drum track**

*Ndugu picks up the wireless mic.*

*Lenna listens for a moment, then sings a refrain from an old blues song, repeating it like a sample.*

*Ndugu freestyles.*

## NDUGU

From the first premonition  
 Leadin' to the invention  
 Of the blackest of powders rippin' through us like an invasion.  
 We the only true chronicle.  
 Lookin' for economical  
 rhymes and reasons, makin' a black future probable.  
 Fluency in sound, crackin' open dat seal.  
 Africa the Land of the Lost - feelin' foreign, but real.  
 Flowin' deep dark and red - the white and blue of it fucked,  
 separated from a culture 'n' stowed away in a trunk.  
 M'brother know it all the time 'cause he live it each day,  
 'fore he shipped off an' bound up an' made to write the *white* way.  
 But homee can't live like this - nah - without feeling that drop.  
 He need sumpin' growin' wild, not rows of owned crops.  
 They ain't nothin' good or right about holdin' limbs down.  
 Why cain't they live an' let live 'fore every one of us drown?  
 Why cain't they live an' let live 'fore every one of us drown?

*Lenna finishes up her line of melody just before the tape stops.*

## MAZUNGUS

I always said y'all make the best entertainers.

*Ndugu aggressively steps toward Mazungus, but Lenna stops him.*

## LENNA

Be patient, be *patient*.

We will get what we need.

*(a nursery rhyme to make him feel better)*

He is too old, too tired

and his thoughts, like weeds,

will wither and die.

Along with his twisted body

and even more wretched mind.

And when the new generation comes,

claiming his oaken chair of power -

time will forget he and his brothers,

and in their stead, grow a flower.

## NDUGU

Preachin',

peace,

and patience

ain't made nuthin' no different.

Because they ain't never listen.

And never will.

There ain't no place to go

*until* he dead.

LENNA

(firm)

Time only will finish the job.

Remember why we're here, son.

*Ndugu drops the mic, pulls away and retreats to the shadows.*

*Lenna starts after him.*

MAZUNGUS

Hmf. Lazy.

*Lenna stops dead in her tracks, turns to face Mazungus.*

LENNA

(smiling)

I may not have civilized speech for things that I hate,  
hoping always for the improbability of a cleansed and cleaned slate.  
But, though I look *first* to the beauty of the land, trees and grass,  
(drops smile)

Don't think that this sister won't whoop y'white ass.

*Lenna walks right by a frozen Mazungus.  
She keeps his eyes on him while she pops  
the tape deck open.*

*She grabs a different tape, pushes play.*

**Projection: (pygmies at the fair)**

**Sound: crowds, distant carnival-like music**

*Lenna walks up to mic on the floor and  
hands it to Mazungus.*

*He tentatively grabs it.*

## TAPE VOICE

Exhibitions and Experiences of the World's Fair St. Louis, 1904.

### **Projection: photos, maps, drawings of the fair**

*Mazungus is still a bit stunned, so Lenna speaks into the mic as he holds it.*

## LENNA

Nineteen hundred and four,  
and one hundred years of celebration  
for the purchase of the lovely territory named Louisiana.  
Meet me there, and witness!  
Dozens of days and hundreds of acres.  
The olympiad ends and science *instead*  
competes for the precious gold.

*Starr, Fwela and Lenna stare expectant at a still stunned Mazungus.*

## MAZUNGUS

Uh. Well. I --

*After a moment, he digs in his pocket for some notes.*

## MAZUNGUS

I apologize.

Musta felt faint for a moment, there.

*(clears throat)*

Where was I?

*He finds his notes.*

MAZUNGUS

Oh, yes!

*Trumpet flourish.*

MAZUNGUS

Man's Greatest Achievement.

The Nineteen Hundred and Four World's Fair!

Don't fail to see it!

LENNA

(egging on)

What big things can we expect at the World's Fair?

MAZUNGUS

Too much to mention, too much to see!

ALL

Tell us! Tell us! (etc.)

**Projection: old newspaper clippings, photographs, advertisements, etc.**

MAZUNGUS

The first tournament of Airships!

The first Olympic Games to be held on American soil!

That's not enough?

How about the grandest musical events the world has ever constructed?

No?

How about a wonderful and magnificent Electric display?

**Projection: a tesla coil that sends electricity throughout the space**

ALL

Ooh! Ahh! (Etc.)

MAZUNGUS

And that's only the beginning!

See the greatest railway exhibit in the world  
featuring iron and steel in perfect harmony.

And, dwarfing even our largest of locomotives is a giant, mammoth  
8000 horse-power turbine engine.

A truly incredible, unbelievable, impossible display  
of the largest engines ever built.

Fifteen breath-taking Exhibit Palaces in all.

The total grounds to exceed one thousand, two-hundred acres  
with over two hundred and fifty acres of nothing less than  
the greatest exhibits man has ever known.

**Sound: canned applause**

*Mazungus, like a carnival barker, is finally  
getting warmed up.*

MAZUNGUS

Wait!

Hold on, now.

I haven't even told you about the most amazing thing of all.

Would you like to hear about it?

Would you?

Would you like to hear about the most fascinating,  
the most mind-bending,  
the most elaborate display

to be set down on this great Earth of God's creation?

**Sound: louder canned applause, some shouts**

*Ndugu, intrigued, slowly makes his way from out of the shadows.*

MAZUNGUS

Alright. Alright!

You've twisted my arm long enough, ladies and gentlemen.

I was instructed to keep this particular surprise to myself,

but I simply cannot contain my excitement.

In celebration of the Louisiana Purchase's centennial anniversary,

we've put together a truly global event.

An exhibit to shame all other exhibits.

*(sidebar)*

Not that you shouldn't see the others...

*He presents the plaster figure by placing a simple, traditional loin cloth around its waist.*

MAZUNGUS

Presenting my personal pride and joy:

The Parade of Evolutionary Progress!

**Sound: canned applause**

MAZUNGUS

Now,

those who *know* the races realize that the average white man is

stronger of limb,

fleeter of foot,

clearer of eye,  
and far more enduring of body under stress of labor and hardship  
than the average yellow or red or black.

**Sound: canned applause begins to distort**

MAZUNGUS

But that doesn't mean the other races

don't bring with them *danger*.

Intrigue.

Bizarre fascination.

Believe it or not,

you can see these savages from around the world

in their native habitats -

with your very own eyes -

brought to you at great economic and mortal cost!

*(pointing to Lenna)*

See the murderous Geronimo wield his terrifying scalping axe!

*Lenna plays the part.*

**Sound: canned "oohs" and "aahhs"**

MAZUNGUS

Or watch as the various sub-races compete in feats of strength and speed.

*(points to Ndugu)*

*Ndugu starts to pick up one of the trees in demonstration, then drops it.*

NDUGU

Fuck this.

MAZUNGUS

*(through gritted teeth, still smiling to the crowd)*

Now just play along now, son.

NDUGU

Thas some bullshit.

LENNA

It's his part to tell.

NDUGU

He ain't never respect us.

Why the hell I gotta do different?

MAZUNGUS

*(still barking)*

It's science, young man.

Survival of the fittest.

You can't possibly believe that these primitive people are more fit for --

NDUGU

Fo' what?

*Mazungus doesn't take the bait.*

MAZUNGUS

And besides!

The people *love* it!

*(points to a group in the audience)*

See the Inuit make homes out of ice!

NDUGU

*(interrupting, to Fwela)*

An' I ain't done witchu.

Where the hell was *you* at?

You jes' leave ya boy like dat?

*Fwela steps away from the reenactment.*

FWELA

What?

MAZUNGUS

*(dances, trying to pull attention back)*

Watch the gypsies dance their seductive dance!

NDUGU

*(ignoring)*

I wanna know where you was.

FWELA

*(unsure)*

A mission.

Perhaps to secure more funds to send my friend home.

NDUGU

Fuck dat. I don't buy that shit fo' one second.

MAZUNGUS

If I tell you, will you allow me to continue?

NDUGU

Yeah.

FWELA

Don't.

LENNA

Now's not the --

NDUGU

*(to Lenna)*

No.

We gon' get the story *right* this time.

*(to Mazungus)*

Talk.

MAZUNGUS

Very well.

The reason that petite pygmy traveled up the Mississippi alone,

the reason that the *terms* of his captivity

was not negotiated by a civilized man,

the reason that little one over there

became suddenly frightened, lost and alone -

was that this penniless preacher, here,

received his pay upon pulling into the port of New Orleans.

And when he got there...

Well, let's just say the colors of the parade

were not the only colors he indulged in.

In fact, you were laid out for quite some time in that sinful city, weren't you?

FWELA

I was ill.

MAZUNGUS

At least you don't deny it.

NDUGU

Y'all make *me* sick.

MAZUNGUS

I'd like to welcome you to land of those

who see things as they *are*, son.

The truth, no doubt, can be difficult to stomach.

LENNA

And what truth is that?

MAZUNGUS

Why, that your heroes are not heroes at all,

your martyrs are victims of their own compulsions,

and that great cost is incurred by any great movement forward.

FWELA

(*on the bandwagon*)

And he loved it at the fair.

And they loved him.

(*a lie*)

He told me.

MAZUNGUS

You see?

Now he's making some sense.

*(to Fwela)*

Now you're coming around to bask in the light.

This is about him, not you.

FWELA

He was brilliant with the crowds.

He'd show his teeth for 5 cents and make more in a week  
than I did in a year.

**Projection: turn of the century carnival freak show advertisements**

MAZUNGUS

*(egging him on)*

He was sensational!

FWELA

He was!

He was --

LENNA

*(disappointed)*

Miserable.

## FWELA

*(defending)*

He did what he always did:  
 made everyone smile -  
 and laugh.

## MAZUNGUS

And gasp, and giggle and scream!  
 He was made a star.  
 And so were you.  
 A star elevated to the very zenith of the moment.

*Lenna and Ndugu stand silent, stunned - as  
 Fwela falls so easily under the spell.*

## FWELA

*(mesmerized)*

That's all I ever wanted.

## MAZUNGUS

Done your daddy proud.

## FWELA

You think?

## NDUGU

Yeah.

You a star, alright.

*Ndugu pulls a gold chain that he's been  
 wearing from under his sweatshirt.*

*It's a science medal from the Worlds' Fair -  
 1<sup>st</sup> prize.*

*He walks up to Fwela and puts it around his neck.*

**Sound: congratulatory music plays through a distant speaker**

**MAZUNGUS**

We here at the National Institute of Natural Sciences and Anthropology  
 would like to present you with 1<sup>st</sup> prize  
 for your instrumental contribution to our Parade,  
 our *pedestal*  
 at which the world may gaze upwards with profound aspiration.  
 You are an inspiration of courage  
 for bringing these savages here to St. Louis for all of us to see.  
 Congratulations, Doctor.

**NDUGU**

He a doctor now, huh?

*Mazungus poses with Fwela as a flash bulb goes off. Mazungus steps back to give Fwela the stage, clapping.*

*Ndugu and Lenna join, but with very different connotation.*

**FWELA**

Thank you.

**MAZUNGUS**

A prize fit for a man of honor.

**FWELA**

Yes.

Thank you.

Yes.

*Fwela examines his new medal and wanders off, hypnotized by it.*

FWELA

Finally.

NDUGU

*(to Lenna)*

See? Thas the real truth.

He ain't never change.

They all the same.

*Lenna thinks about this.*

MAZUNGUS

*(still clapping)*

Now that we're rid of our yarn-spinning,

fairy-tale telling

preacher-man,

why don't we get down to it, shall we?

*Lenna and Ndugu seem a bit lost.*

MAZUNGUS

Oh come, now!

Don't be so down in the mouth.

*Mazungus walks over the tape deck, puts in a new tape, and pushes play.*

## MAZUNGUS

It's only gonna make it that much easier to march on.

To march forward.

Like nature always intended.

## TAPE VOICE

The Life and Times of The New York Zoological Society

**Projection: (pygmy in the zoo)**

**Sound: quintessential 'New York' music plays gently in the background.**

*Mazungus, with eventual help, begins to uproot most of the other trees and place them in a line like prison bars as he speaks.*

## TAPE VOICE

At the turn of the century, evolutionary sciences were at a crossroads.

Caught between popular, but questionable theories like Eugenics  
and empirical studies citing migratory anthropology --

*Mazungus suddenly stops the tape.*

## MAZUNGUS

You know what? No need.

Let's, instead, talk *frankly* about it.

Let's not beat around the bush about it.

Let's just call a spade a spade - no pun, o'course -  
and address the moment that everyone remembers  
without even remembering the man of the moment.

*He places the plaster figure behind the bars. He takes the stuffed orangutan from Starr's cart, and wraps it around the figure's*

*neck as if the figure were holding it.*

MAZUNGUS

And he *is* a man.

No one has ever denied it.

*Mazungus takes up the microphone again.*

MAZUNGUS

Ladies and gentlemen.

I am not here to justify the mistreatment of this perfectly fine fellow.

Nor am I here to justify the sensationalized statements made by  
your papers,  
preachers  
and politicians.

But, understand, I am also not here to apologize.

**Projection: newspaper clippings about the pygmy in the zoo, all names, faces redacted**

*Like a stump speech, Mazungus works the crowd - sitting at the edge of the stage, posing with the figure, etc.*

MAZUNGUS

*(to Lenna and Ndugu)*

Please.

*He gestures to the audience. Perhaps Lenna and Ndugu make their way to the house and sit.*

MAZUNGUS

You see, when the little fellow arrived  
at our new and magnificent Zoological Gardens,

all of us here simply thought that,  
 given the pygmy's place of origin,  
 the streets of New York could not *possibly* be  
 the most auspicious surroundings for a forest-dweller.  
 And, of course, because his friend and keeper was...hmmm...

*He makes a show of searching for the  
 missing Fwela.*

### MAZUNGUS

...it seems *nowhere* to be found ...  
 We thought it best  
 to allow the little pygmy to become our charge -  
 to allow him as a guest in our gardens.

*Lenna stands.*

### LENNA

I know gardens and I know guests.  
 I think you'd better start again and this time -  
 give it your best.

*Mazungus gives a cold stare.*

*She's ruining his speech.*

### MAZUNGUS

(recovering)  
 Heh, heh. Well.  
 You've got me.  
 We are capitalists, are we not?  
 No one in their right mind would allow for a guest to stay  
 without rent -

without *some* compensation.

It's a matter of semantics, really.

*(a new approach)*

We hired him, you see, to be a zookeeper, of course.

He is wonderful with the apes and simply *loves* the open air.

NDUGU

He get paid?

MAZUNGUS

Well, not in American dollars.

What could he possibly do with our contemporary currency?

LENNA

Build a life. Go home.

MAZUNGUS

Alright, now.

We're getting a little off topic.

This was only temporary.

His friend, the fine doctor --

NDUGU

Preacher.

MAZUNGUS

*(ignoring)*

His *friend* was doing very important research in South Carolina and assured me that he would be back very...

*(looks for Fwela again)*

...shortly.

NDUGU

Oh, I gotchu.

So you pay *him*, right?

You pay dat deadbeat a pretty penny  
for yo' very own monkey janitor --

MAZUNGUS

*(backpedaling)*

I *never* said --

NDUGU

An animal

fo' all them rich white folks from the Hamptons  
ta come an stare at.

**Sound: Some canned boos erupt**

MAZUNGUS

This exhibit was built for the enjoyment of everyone --

NDUGU

Nigga in cage,  
where dey belong, right?

**Sound: more boos**

MAZUNGUS

You said it, not me --

NDUGU

*(trying to rile up the crowd)*

Make 'em streets less scary for all us tree-folk,  
we behind bars, right?

MAZUNGUS

I ain't talkin' about you, son --

NDUGU

Culture make us criminals, way you write it.  
Best keep us down on lock.

**Projection: new paper headlines condemning the pygmy at the zoo**

MAZUNGUS

Now hold on a minute!

Hold it, right there.

I may given a small amount of money to this little pygmy's master --

LENNA

Master?

**Sound: Huge eruption of boos**

MAZUNGUS

*(a misstep)*

Not *master* - friend.

I may have given a minor stipend  
for allowing such a fascinating individual  
to become part of the Zoological Garden Family --

LENNA

The tide is rolling in and it is time be cleansed.

NDUGU

And they gon' eat you up,  
bring on d'end --

MAZUNGUS

Fine!

**Sound: boos cease**

MAZUNGUS

Fine.

You're right.

I can't figure why I should be afraid.

It's an affliction, I think from being infected with so much animosity.

The truth (and the truth is what I *stand* for) -

The truth is -

*Mazungus loosens his collar, prepares for the reaction.*

MAZUNGUS

We *did* pay a man for the privilege of housing this incredible African dwarf.

And we did put him on display just like the people wanted.

And he attracted thousands of you.

**Sound: canned boos again**

MAZUNGUS

*(fighting them this time)*

Thousands of you!

Every single day.

Now, why would we do anything else?

And how dare you turn so easily?

He was *abandoned*.

We didn't know what to do with him.

He was a menace.

He hated it here.

We gave him free reign of the Gardens,

and he grew mischievous and discontent.

We were not equipped --

LENNA

Those were no gardens.

They were cages for apes and --

MAZUNGUS

He *is* an ape!

**Sound: canned gasps**

MAZUNGUS

Is that what you want?

There's no place for him here.

He has no civilization in him -

but I don't blame him for that.

I *blame* him - for being here at all!

*(pointed)*

I would have died before I let those white strangers take me from *my* home.

I would have *died* first.

He should be sent back to the black of that dark, dark place.

That's where *he* belongs.

*Fwela appears behind the bars, next to the figure.*

FWELA

He did not choose to come.

MAZUNGUS

You.

You should be the one standing up here right now.

You're the one that made the little man into a side-show.

You're the one that sent him.

Sent him across the sea.

Sent him to that fair.

But he didn't stop there.

No.

He continued on without you. Alone.

To the zoo.

To the museum.

To the orphanage.

To the tobacco farm.

He spent time just about everywhere because no place would take him.

He was a troublemaker,

a savage

and *friendless* because of you.

LENNA

He had other friends.

He still had something to lose.

I taught him english and history -  
gave him something to choose.

MAZUNGUS

And, remind me,  
how *did* he make his way to you,  
down the James River to White Hill Rock?

LENNA

A colleague.  
A friend.

MAZUNGUS

Ah, yes.  
The pygmy was the topic on everyone's lips,  
from the paperboy to the president.

(*to Lenna and Ndugu*)

And, now that I think of it -  
every single one of your folk  
that made it through seminary,  
law school,  
(or even learned to read it write)  
made the pygmy their business as well -  
drew even more ink from that press,

making the story bigger and blacker every day.

NDUGU

Y'damn right.

LENNA

We were attempting to make a bad life better.

And we did so by giving speeches and writing letters.

We never caged a soul or used him for gain,

we simply sought a place for his remaining days to remain.

MAZUNGUS

Your nursery rhymes, poems and grandstanding speeches

don't change a thing. They never did, and they never will.

LENNA

*(playing the role)*

I speak a way sometimes 'cause it's the way white folk listen:

if a negro sound wise all while makin' their floor glisten.

But since you speak ugly words, I suppose I will too.

Seems the only way we gon' make it to a conclusion das' true.

*(dropping in)*

You did nothing for him.

You only used him.

Now you cry and cry

about how the history books remember you.

But you are remembered as you should be.

A dusty, worn footnote.

MAZUNGUS

*(furious)*

Out of the goodness of your heart,  
you took in the little sharp-toothed bugger.  
Is that right?

For no other reason than your overwhelming sympathy  
for his plight?

To fit into our scary new world and make a new home.  
I stand in awe of your selflessness.

LENNNA

*(smiling)*

Say *every* word hiding within that syrupy southern talk,  
But please be specific, for - as you know - we're all dense as rock.

MAZUNGUS

Very well.

*Spotlights only on Mazungus and Lenna.*

**Projection: "an unfortunate intermission"**  
**Sound: light, friendly "intermission" music plays underneath in the background.**

MAZUNGUS

Those history books you speak of?  
You've maneuvered yourself very slyly within, I think.  
Now I may be remembered for my exhibitions,  
evolutionary experiments,  
and anomalous anthropology.  
That much is true.

But you - on the other hand,  
will be etched with glowing reverence  
for your political and poetic pontifications.  
Yet we are more the same than you will ever admit.

### LENNNA

There ain't nothin' the same about us.

### MAZUNGUS

I love your spirit.  
And for a woman.  
And a mixed breed.  
Truly something to see.

### NDUGU

Step off.

### MAZUNGUS

Another pipes up!  
It's a chorus for the cause.  
Let me tell you what I see:  
You band together as if sharing something silent,  
a truth that cannot be shared by another color.

And you speak as though our truth -  
of separation and segregation  
is evil.

But let me tell you something:  
You, yourself pulled the pygmy to your breast like a child.  
And he was no child.

He wore top hats,  
smoked cigars  
and cleverly accumulated coins from the thousands that ogled him.  
He was no child.  
He was the cause of my undoing  
because he proved that he was no less businessman than I.  
I put him on display  
and he was quietly mocking me the whole of the time.  
If his Congo had not been ripped asunder by enterprise,  
he would have returned a hero, an adventurer -  
far more hero than his Fwela could have ever hoped to be.

*The music stops.*

### MAZUNGUS

I had nothing to do with the destruction of his home.  
He had everything to do with the destruction of my career.

### LENNA

Do not expect my sympathy.

### MAZUNGUS

My skin is too light to expect anything of the like.

### LENNA

You speak grains of truth, old man - but only a pinch.  
I did teach him our words and cause -  
and some of my brothers and sisters did trumpet his imprisonment,  
waving the bright flag of injustice -  
all while knowing the soapbox on which they stood.

But his skin and my skin are not the only thing that we hold so dear.  
We share Africa.

### MAZUNGUS

*(he scoffs)*

Africa is too large for you to claim it so easily.

### LENNA

*(with inspiration)*

When he found his way to Lynchburg and finally to my home,  
He sat in my garden and spoke to me of the woods and of the Congo.  
I hoped against everything that the forests of Virginia could take their place.  
Because these were the very same stories my grandmother told me:  
of grabbing and clutching for any handfuls of earth they could  
before being dragged away across the Atlantic,  
never to see familiar ground - ever again.

You could not understand,  
because your home is strong and vast beneath your feet.

And it grows with every ship you send and flag you plant.  
So you diminish us.

All of us.

And we are diminished.

We are diminished because a part of us was ripped away long ago.

### MAZUNGUS

I never set foot on that continent.

*Lights shift.*

NDUGU

Nah.

You too smart fo'dat.

What *you* do is send ya'boy to any turf you think's dope.

But you ain't a man.

There ain't nuthin' more animal than takin' land.

An' just like an animal -

you scared a'us.

MAZUNGUS

Preposterous.

LENNA

*(pressing now)*

You know that it's true.

You feel lessened by the mere presence

of an already diminished people -

as though this land were ever even yours to claim.

But what you fear most is your own admission:

an admission of inferiority,

an admission of insecurity -

that the land *you* stole might one day be stolen back.

And that fear grows, *cultivates* the hate we take on every day,

in some little way.

## NDUGU

Ain't none of us choose to come.

But now,

we *here*.

*Mazungus falls uncharacteristically silent. Ndugu comes to Lenna's side and places his hand on her shoulder.*

## MAZUNGUS

*(quietly)*

You did nothing for that pygmy.

## FWELA

No one could.

He was doomed in that moment.

## MAZUNGUS

What moment?

## FWELA

The moment

the men that could not love the land

landed on his shores.

*Fwela goes to Starr and takes her piece of white chalk, then flips the tape and presses play.*

**Projection: "the eight hills of lynchburg"**

**Sound: *nature - insects buzz, birds chirp.***

*Fwela draws a big white square around the "x" in the middle of the space.*

## FWELA

*(to Lenna)*

It's your turn.

*Fwela begins to take up the trees, last arranged in a line, and stack them on either side of the space.**Lenna removes the plaster cast from behind the bars, and sits down beside him.*

## LENNA

When he does finally make his way to me -

down the James,

over the hill

and up Pierce Street to my home -

I know right away.

Intelligence, you see, is in the eyes.

And you can *see* it -

the reason those patrons at the zoo feel so uneasy

when staring through the bars at him

is the *same* reason white folk feel uneasy

when the slave ships arrive on their shores:

They had been sold a bill of working black animals,

but they now see the eyes,

and *know* the truth.

So they take their seven white hills and give us an eighth.

A place to tend and make our own, a small plot to claim and stake.

It is not our home, but it must now *be* home.

And though it is little, is it land.

And the land...*discourses*.

Mmhmm...it is as true as anything.  
And no one knew that better than he.  
So I invite him to my garden behind my little house.  
My garden which surrounds the little cabin  
which holds tight my words, papers, and pictures.  
My little cabin flanked by a breathing, knowing palette:  
Plants which are young, and old, and fragrant.  
It is my very own life-giving ocean that surrounds my buoy -  
my raft of thoughts set afloat,  
drifting out and away from the blankness.  
And the colors that I love so dear are all here with me.  
And I let them play.  
And I listen.  
You see, few listen as I've learned to listen, but he -  
he can listen with his indefinite self.  
I am an apprentice to *his* wisdom.  
He has the very essence of the forest in his eyes.  
He makes my green thumb greener and my greener thoughts ripe.  
He seeks comfort here, which brings me great joy.  
**Sound: quiet audio (almost an old radio) playing sound bites of speeches by prominent civil rights figures of the time.**

LENNA

He is so bright.  
A light.  
Illuminating the day and night.  
So curious, he even stays planted when the great men arrive.  
Great minds which often take over the quiet of my garden

with burgeoning renaissance and cast-iron wills.

NDUGU

DuBois makin' noise.

LENNA

And though I, personally, want little to do with it.

NDUGU

Booker T and schoolin' free.

LENNA

All are welcome guests in my home.

NDUGU

Dr. King wit' the dreams he bring.

LENNA

And it is not for me to take my children away  
from tides that roll so strong.

NDUGU

Mr. Hughes know how to choose.

LENNA

The debates pass across the petals of peonies  
near the benches along the walk.

And as they wax on, he just listens.

*They listen for a moment to the civil rights  
speeches against the backdrop of the  
garden.*

MAZUNGUS

*(can't keep his mouth shut)*

The pygmy can't understand a word of it.

And neither can I.

NDUGU

*(quick to defend)*

You ain'never try.

LENNA

*(calmly, to the figure)*

Warring words, disrupting my little pond.

*Lenna stands and walks over to the men and calmly removes her gardening gloves.*

MAZUNGUS

*(to Lenna)*

Better call off your dog, ma'am or --

NDUGU

You wanna sit down,

before I make y'ass sit down.

MAZUNGUS

I am far less afraid of you, boy,

than you so easily assume.

*Lenna smacks Ndugu upside his head with one hand grabs Mazungus' ear with the other.*

NDUGU

What the fuck?

MAZUNGUS

You filthy little --

*She tightens the grip on his ear.*

LENNA

If you are all going to act like children,  
then a children's tale is what you shall have.

*She releases Mazungus, ejects the tape in  
the tape deck, pulls out a magnifying glass  
like a paperweight from her apron, then  
rifles through the tapes for something  
specific.*

LENNA

You see, when men find themselves too high upon the pulpit,  
(a case as common as the cold),  
I prefer to pause the day,  
forget their buzzing for a moment,  
pick up my great glass for my poor, poor eyes.  
And there,  
with my hands in the dirt and thoughts trained on the dust,  
I look deep into the glass for the answer...

*She finds it. Changes tapes.*

LENNA

Ah!

Here we are.

*She pushes play.*

**Projection:**  
**"the little brown beetle in the garden"**

*The sound of children humming a nursery rhyme can be heard.*

**TAPE VOICE**

The Little Brown Beetle in the Garden.

Lights shift, become vibrant.

**TAPE VOICE**

In a wild free field in a far away land -  
 beneath airy umbrellas of fennel  
 and down the green dense stalk of a sunflower -  
 there clung a little brown beetle.

*A spotlight illuminates the plaster figure.*

**TAPE VOICE**

The little brown beetle, out for his morning climb,  
 was wholly unaware of the little girl that had wandered through the grasses,  
 hoping to pluck the largest sunflower she could find.

**LENNA**

But sometimes, life diverts the flow without warning.

*Lenna picks up the figure, holding it in the air.*

**TAPE VOICE**

"Help me!"

The little beetle said as it clung to the green stem.

LENNA

He called out into the white and heard nothing in reply.

TAPE VOICE

"Anyone!"

*Lenna swoops the figure around through the space.*

TAPE VOICE

The journey was long and frightening.

But, as suddenly as it began, the flight ended.

*Lenna sets the figure down.*

TAPE VOICE

"Is it over?"

LENNA

And that's when the beetle began to slowly open his eyes.

**Projection: images of a great garden fill the space**

MAZUNGUS

I'm sorry.

But I *must* interrupt.

**The images vanish for a moment.**

LENNA

*(none too pleased)*

Yes?

MAZUNGUS

I refuse to take part in these glorified gardening lessons.

*Lenna abruptly pulls a small spade from her pocket, which startles Mazungus.*

LENNA

You simply have no idea how to use your imagination, do you?

*She walks toward him with the spade in hand.*

MAZUNGUS

Whoa, now. I didn't mean --

LENNA

Don't worry. I have just the thing.

*She shoves the gardening gloves and spade to his chest.*

LENNA

You can be the gardener. Like me.

*She pushes him into the white chalk square.*

MAZUNGUS

But I don't --

*She gently presses him down to his knees.*

LENNA

Quiet, now.

*Embarrassed, he complies. He puts on the gloves and begins to pantomime using the shovel.*

LENNA

Now where was I?

**The garden images return.**

TAPE VOICE

"Where am I?" the beetle said

as he climbed up to the petals of the sunflower to get a better view.

LENNA

But what he saw then seemed impossible:

TAPE VOICE

Rather than the wild green fields of grasses and coriander,

Sprawling out in front of the beetle lay instead

one or two each

of a hundred different colors.

LENNA

Most of which he had never seen before.

TAPE VOICE

Bulbous red and waxen looking fruits,

hanging heavy off the vine.

Beautiful, orderly rows of purplish flowers,

incandescent in the low sunlight which now receded to dusk.

LENNA

So many things held rigid  
in between a firm  
and perfectly white  
rectangular wall.

*Lenna draws an even thicker line of white chalk around Mazungus.*

TAPE VOICE

Having never seen a garden before the beetle cried:  
"Get me down from here!"

*Lenna ushers Fwela into the story.  
He does not resist.*

TAPE VOICE

And that's when the silence of the setting sun  
was broken by the buzzing sound of something closing in,  
faster than the little beetle could even turn his head:

LENNA

Suddenly, sitting directly next to him on the amber-colored petal  
was a perfect flying machine of yellow and black,  
painted like a fighter plane and staring at him with mesh-black eyes.

TAPE VOICE

A beautiful bee sitting beside him.

FWELA

*(as bee)*

Now what in the world are you doing up here?

TAPE VOICE

The bee asked questions,  
but the little beetle was far too scared to respond.

FWELA

Well, I don't know if you've got any wings under there, but--

LENNA

The beetle checked, but found no wings.

FWELA

But if you don't,  
you should leave the high places in the sky to those who can fly.

*The bee starts to leave.*

TAPE VOICE

So the bee decided to leave, but just then --

LENNA

The beetle cried out --

TAPE VOICE

"Wait!"

FWELA

I'm busy.

TAPE VOICE

The beetle, with no one else to turn to,  
explained that he was lost.

LENNA

This sincerity was not lost on the worker bee -  
he could see the fear in the beetle's beady little eyes.

TAPE VOICE

And so, the bee responded in kind:

FWELA

We are all lost at one time or another.  
The key, you see, is finding your place.

TAPE VOICE

Telling him his own story of how he came to the garden.

FWELA

My mother (she's the Queen)  
used to tell me stories about my father.  
How he used to fly from flower to flower  
across a far away field - a place that I now only find in my dreams.  
And I can almost see it sometimes, like a memory.  
But I couldn't possibly remember,  
because I was born in that little brown box over there  
with my brothers and sisters.  
And it isn't so bad.

TAPE VOICE

The bee spoke fondly of the perfect petunias and radiant roses.

LENNA

And of the gardener that kept everything growing and growing -  
as though nothing would stop it.

*Lenna looks toward Mazungus who is now quite focused on his little white square.*

TAPE VOICE

But the bee did have one secret to tell:

FWELA

I do have trouble, I must admit, doing what I'm supposed to.  
I'm distracted with those memories of home -  
dreams of myself in another place in another time.

TAPE VOICE

But just then - a sound startled the yellow jacket.

**Sound: "sshshhhh" of seeping smoke**

*Smoke begins to fill the space.*

FWELA

*(paranoid)*

No matter. No matter at all!

I know my place, now.

And when everybody knows their place,

does what they're supposed to -

When we follow *all* the rules

everything works out just as it should.

MAZUNGUS

Otherwise you know what comes next.

TAPE VOICE

It was The Smoke.

LENNNA

The suffocating smoke.

FWELA

*(laughs uncomfortably)*

Good luck!

*Fwela buzzes abruptly out of view.*

FWELA

*(from the shadows)*

And remember to know your place!

TAPE VOICE

And so, as quick as he appeared,  
off zipped the bee, zig-zagging out of sight.

Alone again,  
the beetle carefully crawled his way to the soft ridge of the petal,  
seeking a path to the more-familiar ground.

But as he peered over the edge, something magnificent wove into view.

**Projection: across the space - white strands, visually connecting the last standing tree trunks.**

**Sound: dramatic Mbulumbumba music**

## LENNA

Strands of silk crossed and curved and catapulted across the horizon.  
 Glistening in the now crowned and elevated moonlight,  
 the perfect bridge beckoned the frightened insect.

*Lenna signals to Ndugu. He takes the cue.  
 The strands vibrate.*

## TAPE VOICE

"Hello?" the beetle said with fear in his voice.

*Out from the shadows, Ndugu sneaks up  
 behind the plaster cast with ropes in tow.*

*With each response, he binds a limb of the  
 plaster cast to a trunk.*

## TAPE VOICE

"Is someone there?"

*Another limb.*

## TAPE VOICE

"Mr. Bee?"

*Another.*

## TAPE VOICE

"Who's there?"

## NDUGU

Gotchew!

*Ndugu shows his face.*

## TAPE VOICE

Just then, a magnificent spider spun himself  
around the beetle and into view.  
The beetle, terrified, tried to shout for help,  
but to no avail.

*Lenna prods Ndugu to speak.*

## NDUGU

Ain't no one gon' come get you here.  
Un-ugh. Hell no.

## TAPE VOICE

"What do you want?" asked the beetle.

## NDUGU

Ordinarily, some dumb-ass get caught up in this?  
I jess chew they ass up and spit 'em out.

## TAPE VOICE

The spider stared with his many eyes  
and admitted that tonight - the little beetle was *awfully* lucky.

## NDUGU

'cause I already eat.

*Mazungus suddenly stands.*

**Projection/Sound fades.**

## MAZUNGUS

If I had known we could improvise,  
I would have provided some much-needed color  
to this otherwise boring beetle biography.

## LENNA

You know what?  
That's a wonderful idea.

## TAPE VOICE

The beetle responded with --

*Lenna stops the tape.*

## LENNA

But unfortunately,  
the gardener never says anything in *this* story.

*Ndugu sits Mazungus back down.*

## NDUGU

*(to Mazungus)*

What I tell you?

*(to Lenna)*

You good.

## LENNA

Thank you, darlin'  
**Projection and Sound return.**

LENNA

Now, realizing he wouldn't be eaten -  
at least for the night -  
the beetle sighed in relief.

*(as beetle)*

"So...if you're not going to eat me...  
would you mind letting me go  
so I can get down to the dark earth below?"

NDUGU

Yo, what ya wanna go down there fo'?  
You ain't from around here, and if you ain't got a place?  
You ain't got a job?  
They gon' tear you down, stomp out yo'guts, belie-dat.

LENNA

The beetle was confused:  
"You were born here, then?"

NDUGU

Born'n'raise.

LENNA

"Well, what do *you* do?"

NDUGU

Psht. Survive.

LENNA

"Is that *your* job?"

NDUGU

Naw, see...I keep the numbers right.

This little place - without me?

Shit get crazy.

Everybody wants a piece of this sweet little Eden,  
but they ain't enough room.

So I clean house.

LENNA

The beetle was impressed:

"You must be important."

NDUGU

Nah - I still gotta watch my back.

LENNA

"For what?"

NDUGU

I wake up sometime,  
and everything I do - 'sgone.

Shredded.

Ripped up.

An' I gotta start all over.

LENNA

"Who would do that?"

NDUGU

I don't know, little man.

All's I know is - it's kill or be killed.

MAZUNGUS

*(trying to throw a wrench)*

Then why don't you all just go somewhere else?

NDUGU

*(to Mazungus)*

Cuz this place need me.

But that don't mean I don't thank'bout it.

*Ndugu crouches by the plaster figure.*

NDUGU

Check it,

my pops told me about this place near the water where he grow up.

I mean, it ain't perfect.

He still gotta eat.

Still gotta live.

But he tell me a brother could build something solid there.

Something strong.

And no one gonna break it down cuz they scared a you.

*(a beat - he thinks about home)*

I don't know...

*(a beat)*

LENNA

"I had a place like that,"  
the beetle explained.

NDUGU

Yeah?

LENNA

"A perfect little patch of dirt."

NDUGU

Yeah?

An' what *you* do?

LENNA

"Just...eat little bugs."

NDUGU

True.

LENNA

"Plant bits and earth."

NDUGU

True. True.

LENNA

And the little brown beetle smiled big  
and waxed on about his home underground,  
in the darkest, deepest pitch of the land,

grinding up the ground in front of him,  
spitting out the earth behind.

Finally, his love for home moved the spider.

NDUGU

*(earnestly moved)*

Alright.

*Ndugu starts to release him.*

NDUGU

They some ground right there - see?

Nice little patch.

LENNA

The beetle was so thankful  
that he wrapped his little brown legs around the spider.

*Ndugu takes a moment to hold the little  
plaster cast.*

NDUGU

*(recovering)*

Yo.

An' if maybe you find that bit a dirt again,  
the one you tell me about?

An' they - you know - some reeds or driftwood or some shit nearby?  
You let me know an' I'll come find you.

LENNA

Surprised, the beetle asked,  
"How would you get there?"

## NDUGU

You ain't got no idea what I can do with this white, silky shit.  
 A summer breeze and the right design?  
 I'm a paratrooper, droppin' in on you like a dope rhyme.

*Ndugu ties a single rope around the figure's waist.*

## NDUGU

Prosperity.

*Ndugu slips into the shadows.*

## LENNA

The little beetle  
 took the threadbare gift  
 and lowered himself to the sanctuary of soil below.

*Lenna unties the rope.*

## LENNA

And there, he burrowed and burrowed and burrowed and burrowed.  
 He ate like a king  
 and spent days upon days in the dark and silent ground  
 beneath the perfect garden of --

*Mazungus stands, throws down the  
 gardening gloves.*

## MAZUNGUS

*(fed up)*

And so the insects all lived happily every after.

NDUGU

It ain't like that.

Why can't you see it?

He ain't *never* feel right in that dirt.

No matter how much time pass.

LENNNA

It's just a story.

*Fwela walks up to the plaster cast, takes a rag from his pocket, then begins to clean off the charcoal teeth drawn on his face.*

FWELA

That's a very...*sad* story.

MAZUNGUS

And, more importantly, an *abysmal* story to tell children.

LENNNA

Children need no protection from nature or truth.

They are often one in the same.

*Fwela sits next to the plaster figure.*

FWELA

He understood that.

LENNNA

More than anyone I've ever known before or since.

*Ndugu, on his own, begins to take the trees, one at a time, and pile them around the figure.*

FWELA

He enjoyed your garden?

He found *some* joy at least in the forests of Lynchburg?

LENNA

He always did the best he could.

MAZUNGUS

Now how in the world would you know that?

LENNA

Pardon me?

MAZUNGUS

How do *you* -

know *that*?

LENNA

I only know what he said to me and what I saw my own eyes.

MAZUNGUS

Yet you tell us a tale of this poor brown insect -

as though you know his mind.

LENNA

As I've said, it's just a story -

though it is hardly difficult to suppose that --

## MAZUNGUS

Now this is where I take issue.

*This is where I cannot stand idol*  
whilst you drown the facts  
with gentle words  
and a kind disposition.

## LENNA

I speak no lies.

## MAZUNGUS

But you make mighty assumptions.  
You tried to give him a home - well, so did I.  
You think you know him better because of the color of your skin.  
Well, you are not him.

## FWELA

She did far better than we - and you know it.

## MAZUNGUS

And how much better was that?  
Could she save him?  
Could she send him back to his home?  
Could she turn back the clock on time -  
time that pressed forward like it always does,  
plucking his land like a cotton field?

## LENNA

No.

MAZUNGUS

I didn't think so.

*Ndugu, finally finishes dragging the trees  
into the shape of a funeral pyre.*

NDUGU

Now is now.

Ain't none o'that matter no more.

We was already planted right here, *generations* in.

Tryin' to grow - tryin' to survive.

But my man? He was uprooted.

An' roots don't live long when they in the wrong earth.

Ain't none o'y'all help him.

Not in the end.

MAZUNGUS

We agree on something, it seems.

Because in the end, it doesn't matter a pinch.

Because in the end, it always plays out the same way.

NDUGU

We see about that.

*Ndugu presses play.*

**Projection: (the woods past pierce street)**

TAPE VOICE

The Song of the Choir Invisible

March 20th, 1916.

**Sound: quiet gospel music in the background**

LENNA

It's time, son.

Tell us about his final night.

NDUGU

I wasn't there.

I only know what my granddaddy tell me.

LENNA

But he is now gone. So it is yours, now, to pass down.

No one else's.

NDUGU

I know.

LENNA

You ready?

NDUGU

*(beat)*

Yeah.

*Lenna takes the figure and places it on top of the pyre. Mazungus sits on one upstage corner, Lenna on another. Fwela sits close to the figure, Ndugu steps forward.*

*Lenna hums along with the gospel music.*

*A beat.*

NDUGU

That night:

*(remembering)*

It's...slow

and hot.

Rain all day.

So hot ain't nobody move for sweet tea.

But us kids - we don't care.

We wanna go huntin' in the woods.

We ain't allowed, though - not without him.

So we look.

But we cain't find'im.

But we keep lookin', right?

We stubborn like that.

So we look som'more.

An' look an' look an' look.

Nothing. It start gettin' dark.

And that's when I see'im:

Carryin' branch after branch after branch,

limb after limb all the way down the street.

An' we jes' watch.

## LENNA

Why does he gather so much fire wood?

## NDUGU

'Cause he don't let us help, see?

He been actin' real *quiet* lately.

Ain't wanna play with us kids no more.

Not like he used ta.

So we don't help. We jes' kids.

**Projection/Sound: a blaze that slowly, continually grows in intensity - eventually filling the space**

LENNA

Is it a sign?

NDUGU

An' as that sun set,  
we sit at the edge of the road, up on that hill,  
an' we watch him build that fire - full blaze.

LENNA

A call to his ancestors?

NDUGU

Me, Wilbert, Greg an' Whip -  
we stare like we see'n lightnin' for the first -  
hearts beatin' so hard, you can hear 'em above them crickets.  
Then he pull something out of them woods.  
Something.  
He breath in like he gonna suck in the clouds above, then he blow into it.

**Sound: a Molimo horn bellows**

LENNA

The Molimo horn raised to awaken his father and mother.

NDUGU

An' he *dances*.

He dances 'round that fire like nothin' else -  
Whirling faster and faster.

So fast, the wind start pickin' up with'im.

Then he start chantin'.

He start moanin'.

Sweat pourin' off his brow,

makin' the ground steam up.

*Ndugu moves toward the figure and touches his shoulder.*

*He whispers something into the figure's ear.*

## LENNA

And from the top of the hill,

the boy, he screams to him:

I honor the choir invisible.

*Ndugu takes out a match, in preparation, and sets it in the plaster figure's hand. He turns directly to the audience.*

## NDUGU

*(with increasing tempo)*

I never knew what the hell he was talkin' about half the time,

but I listened, you know what I'm sayin'?

My pops was...I don't know where he was.

It don't matter.

*(looking to the figure)*

So I learned from him instead - we all did.

He told us about how his own father taught him everything there was to know.

Everything.

How to hunt, fish, and watch yo' ass with the beasts of the world.

I always listen,

but I was always pissed off, cuz' I wanted my own pops to show me.  
I felt cheated.

LENNA

You were young.

NDUGU

I *was* young.

But one day, I don't know -

I *got* what he was sayin'.

I knew it in my bones.

He was talkin' about the forest.

His pops - his father was the *forest*.

The goddamn *trees* was the teacher.

The *trees* was the shelter.

The forest was every man's father.

Shit.

(beat)

I ain't cheated.

*He* was cheated.

And cheated.

And broke down.

LENNA

And diminished.

NDUGU

And diminished.

There ain't no one got the strength he did to go on like that.

LENNA

He had the very essence of the forest in his eyes.

NDUGU

Not like that.

He knew he ain't never gon' go back.

He knew there weren't no trees, weren't no spirits left.

LENNA

His father, the forest was gone.

NDUGU

And even tho' he learn ta read 'n' write,

ain't no one answer him.

Not a damn sound.

*Ndugu looks to Fwela, who bows his head.*

NDUGU

And thas' when I saw him turn that fire up.

Thas' when he look at me wit' those eyes.

LENNA

He was pulled.

NDUGU

*(correcting)*

He pull *himself*.

LENNA

East.

As though the very ocean itself detached his feet from this foreign land.

NDUGU

Tore' im.

LENNA

Removed him permanently.

Until he floated,

floated,

floated.

NDUGU

Like burnin' ash.

LENNA

Floated along without an ounce of him anchored to the earth.

NDUGU

E'en though that forest give' im strength.

LENNA

His hope for home had run dry.

NDUGU

An' that night.

LENNA

In the darkness...

NDUGU

While we was asleep.

He.

LENNA

He.

MAZUNGUS

Must I say it?

NDUGU

I got this.

He...

FWELA

The Egyptians called the pygmies 'those who rejoice the heart of Pharaoh.'

NDUGU

He...

FWELA

Sarno, living amongst them for years, knew them as  
'the most intelligent, well-adjusted people on the earth.'

MAZUNGUS

He was a pygmy.

Nothing more.

NDUGU

*(with difficulty)*

While we was all sleeping,  
he slip out behind Mammy Joe's store on the corner.

He pick up...

LENNA

Go on.

NDUGU

*(finding strength)*

He pick up that revolver he stash in the hay behind that shed.

That old gray shed.

Where we play hide-and-seek.

Where we eat Mammy Joe's big-ass, saucer-sized cookies.

He pick up that revolver and...

**Projections stop.**

*A beat.*

**Sound: A gunshot.**

*A beat.*

NDUGU

Word spread like blood on the ground,

seepin' underneath his little body.

Those eyes.

FWELA

*(remembering)*

Deep as the 'Big Watah.'

LENNA

We all asked for days and days and days:

Isn't there a way we *could* have sent him home?

Home to the Kasai teeming with fish?  
 Home to the Ituri, with fresh Mango,  
 Lying on his back, watching his one star in the sky?  
 His one fire?  
 But always, with time, the fire must recede into memory.

*A beat.*

NDUGU

Mbye OtaBenga.

FWELA

Mbye.

NDUGU

Ain't no one say his name right.

*That's the truth.*

*They each bow their heads in their own way.*

*Suddenly, Fwela interrupts the moment of silence.*

FWELA

Can I -

May I say something?

LENNA

That is not the way.

We don't go back.

You know that.

NDUGU

Wait.

*He sees something.*

NDUGU

(*to Fwela*)

Whatchu got?

MAZUNGUS

More lies.

NDUGU

(*to Mazungus*)

It ain't your choice.

MAZUNGUS

I will not stand for this.

He only says what --

NDUGU

Your chapter closed.

*Ndugu takes the loin cloth off of the plaster figure and tosses it at Mazungus.*

MAZUNGUS

See how you do without me.

*He exits.*

LENNA

(*to Ndugu*)

Son?

NDUGU

*(to Lenna)*

I already say what I need ta say.

An somethin's gotta change.

An' I ain't gonna carry the burden myself.

*(to Fwela)*

You gon' help this time.

But you gonna do it right.

*Fwela looks to Lenna.*

LENNA

*(with hesitation)*

Give your sermon.

*Fwela tucks in his shirt and steps forward.*

### **Projection: (the last testament)**

*He takes a letter out of his pocket, looks at it for a minute, then begins.*

FWELA

Brothers and sisters.

I have a confession.

The other day, I received a letter.

The letter had, folded within, a newspaper clipping.

The headline reads:

“Sad story of young African who committed suicide here.”

*Fwela carefully folds the letter back up and puts it in his pocket.*

## FWELA

I have no verse to share with you today.

Just a saying.

A saying that I learned from a dear, dear friend -

My little friend would say,

“his heart is white, Fwela”

or

“his heart is black.”

A white heart, you understand, was a good heart.

A black heart was an evil one -

the kind that, loosed in all directions, brings war upon the world.

*(asking the audience directly)*

Tell me, then, which is a better way to live one's life?

A man who sees no further than the pigment in another man's skin,

or a man who judges solely on the shading of another man's heart?

*(his confession)*

I met Mbye OtaBenga when I was a twenty-year-old man

near the Kasai River in the Congo,

deep within the heart of the great continent of Africa.

I bought him for salt, and stole him across the Atlantic as an artifact.

I sold him to a fair, used him as a bargaining chip at a museum,

then left him at a zoo.

He was my friend,

despite my profound efforts to destroy his trust in me.

He called me “Fwela” and looked to me as his keeper.

It's a strange thing to be given another man's life.  
 A very strange thing.  
 I had such great doubt in surviving my own.  
 And yet, still, he followed me.  
 And when he could follow me no more, he wrote to me.  
 He wrote to me of the woods of Lynchburg  
 and of teaching young men to hunt as he had once taught me  
 and I...  
 I never once answered him.  
 I wrote no letter back.  
 (*with growing difficulty*)

What measure of loneliness must a man have in his own heart  
 to turn a gun upon it?

*Lenna whispers something quietly.*

### LENNA

“If my heart ever ceases to love,  
 If my heart ever ceases to love...”

### FWELA

(*directly to the audience*)

His was the whitest heart I have ever known.

*A beat.*

*Ndugu walks up to Fwela.*

### NDUGU

You ain't gon' get sympathy from me.  
 It's too late f'dat.

*Fwela nods in understanding.*

NDUGU

But we move on now.

'Cause that's what we gotta do.

*Fwela exits.*

*Lenna walks up to Starr and hands her a small picture she has in her pocket.*

*Starr finally stands.*

STARR

Thank you. I think I have what I need.

*Lenna and Ndugu sit on either side of the plaster cast of Mbye OtaBenga.*

*The lights recede until only the pyre is lit.*

*Starr sits down, and pulls out her notepad and, after a moment, pushes record on the tape player.*

STARR

Mbye OtaBenga was a hunter, a dancer, a father, a husband, a friend.

He was kidnapped by enterprise while his home was hewn and burned  
ten thousand kilometers away.

Yet, despite this not-so-uncommon fate,

he did far better than most in sharing his joy and wisdom  
with whomever was fortunate enough to cross his path -  
whether in the Congo, New Orleans, St. Louis, New York or Lynchburg.

He fought as long as he could.

Until one night - he could fight no longer.

*Lights fade on the plaster cast.*

STARR

And as the sun rose the next day,  
as the people on Pierce Street gathered to pay their respects in mourning,  
a child that knew and loved him  
tugged on his mother's arm and asked:

NDUGU

Where did he go?

STARR

And the mother simply replied:

LENNNA

He has sent his spirit back across the sea, back to Africa.

**Projection: an actual photo of Mbye OtaBenga**

*A beat.*

*Lights, projections, sound fade to black.*

END OF PLAY