

# Gabeba Baderoon

## Finding and Growing Athlone

*i remember the people of pfukani  
whose huts were uprooted in 1968. . .  
goats, dogs, bicycles and pots heaped onto the trucks . . .  
leaving behind fruit trees and gardens  
leaving behind graves of their beloved ones  
—“Memory” by Vonani Bila*

**I** WAS BORN A CHILD OF REMOVAL, THE YEAR AFTER MY PARENTS MARRIED and the year after they were “removed.” The victims of Forced Removals weren’t removed *to* somewhere, only *from*. Nothing comes after it.

Athlone was where they went after they were removed, and Claremont was where they were from. Athlone was . . . nowhere.

In contrast to the fertile soil of their garden in Claremont, the ground here was the grey sand of the Cape Flats, deposited by the sea over the course of a hundred thousand years. A hundred thousand years of sand deposited upon the low surface of the sea around islands that are now the Cape Peninsula. This long history gave us soil through which water ran unimpeded, soil without worms, without richness, which kept nothing.

A child of this ghost place, I didn’t move again for twenty-eight years, living in a single-story house in Crawford for all that time. The house had to grow into itself, and not remain the ghost of the place my parents had lost. This took decades.

Where exactly is Athlone? Is it in the semis of Bokmakierie, or the businesses and houses right next to each other of Belgravia, or the homes around Athlone Stadium, or the new flats overlooking Klipfontein Road, or the scattered double-stories of Crawford? Is it the corner café, the struggle monument, the roadhouse, the hairdressers, the sound system guys, the auto exhaust shops, the butcher, or the primary schools?

White curtains flicker and flutter.

Maybe it’s the sound of the call to prayer or church bells or people wearing hats with yellow and white flowers holding hands, and the children walking behind them looking embarrassed to be so dressed up.

Or it's the bus stop on Thornton Road at 6:30 on winter mornings, with that lingering nighttime cold, rocking from foot to foot blowing on your hands and stomping on cement as the bus turns in slow motion around the corner of Belthorn Road.

Maybe it's the ghost houses that lie beneath the houses you see today.

For six days now I have woken in the middle of the night from jetlag and come into the kitchen to make ginger tea to ease the cough I brought from the plane, and still the light arrests me.

Light through the net curtains in the morning in the front room. Was it this beautiful when I was growing up, dreaming of leaving on a plane? Did I notice the right-angle mountain through the glass that announces the weather through its own white curtains of mist?

"Spine road," says the sign on Klipfontein, where it runs between Athlone and Stellenbosch, where I am living for the year. I think of that sign when I drive down Klipfontein, which runs parallel to Old Klipfontein, the thinner, more modest road that it displaced, both ghost and older sibling. I'm old enough to remember the new one being built. It cuts through what used to be a connected neighbourhood. These Klipfonteins, these twinned roads, are like a real spine, dividing the left side of the body from the right. Driving north to Stellenbosch, I see the Bridgetown and Silvertown neighbourhoods to the left and Belgravia, Belthorn, and Crawford on the right. One side poorer than the other, both sides Black.

When it's still Durban Road, Klipfontein crosses a railway and the Liesbeeck River and draws a line, creating a division that has become almost natural, the distance between the well-off and the poor, between white and Black. *Mowbray, Athlone, Hanover Park*, call the taxi *guardtjies*. A road divides like a river, and never again can you run easily across to the side with the heart.

On the weekends, I drive from Stellenbosch back to my mother's house in Athlone. From the N2, I take exit 11A, the Jan Smuts turnoff to Athlone. Crossing several intersections on Jan Smuts, I eventually see a sign that says "Athlone" to the left, "Turfhall" to the right. And behind me, at the crossing with Klipfontein, a sign says Athlone to the right. Bits of Athlone are distributed along all these spines. On Turfhall Road, I see that new apartments have sprung up in the past year. How beautiful the mountain must be from their windows. I also think of those in the lee of the building, in its shadow, who now look at its walls.

On my street, Uncle Paul, whose house is diagonally opposite, could never

forgive the house next door for its shadow. Yes, he had signed the form that gave them permission to build close to the boundary, but ever afterward he lived in its lee. “My kitchen never gets the sun anymore,” he confided bitterly. That’s the kind of thing that matters. Where does the light fall, and the shadow? Uncle Paul lived with the shadow until the day he died.

Where is Athlone? I have to look on a map to find its edges. Yes, Athlone lies within the boundaries on a map, but it’s also all the places people were forced out of and can never return to.

Because this is my home, I’m not going to write the kind of piece that catalogues the children who were shot, the number of men in prison, the drugs, the struggling single mothers. I’m tired of that story, which pathologizes without looking back, without looking at the loss that lies beneath. I want to come in close, but not like an anthropologist or a tourist, or even some goody-two-shoes who is turning the camera on her own history, catching others in her self-regard. I won’t make the place and the people background again.

I try to share Athlone with my friends who are visiting from Sierra Leone, from the US, from Kenya. But how?

I think I’ve been thinking about this for eighteen years. When I started studying at the University of Cape Town, I was trying not to be where I was from, where people shout in the streets, where the accent is flat, flet, plat, as the place. The more educated I became the more I sounded like I came from nowhere. I left without leaving. When I started to write creatively, I finally recognized that kinetic velocity of shame, of wanting to disappear from where I was.

Now I’ve come back.

The light through the net curtains in the front room around 5 AM.

Buttons he has threaded into strands, unmatched buttons, a lifetime of saved buttons, stray buttons, buttons the other name for Mandrax, buttoned up, lost buttons, odd buttons, jars of them my father saved over a lifetime as a tailor and my brother has threaded into strands, ten long strands out of the hundreds of buttons and cotton reels my father left behind when he died. So many shapes and colours and textures and sizes hanging like history on the wall of my room.

My brother grows shadows and cold along with subtle greens, purples, and reds in the backyard of the house he and my mother share. His garden is years in the making. The moss and cement walls cool the heat of this heating planet. His is a garden of preparation, of raking, of making soil out of grey sand, of everything but orange peels in the compost—the soil is already too acid—catching the

water when the shower is warming up, of smallness, of quiet, of looking. This is his garden of years, of time, of stone and small, moist leaves. After three decades, his garden is no longer a prelude, it has tipped into the long middle. He gazes at it in the light of his cigarette and the moon. The cool comes and stays all night with the breathing moon, as smoke and clouds pass from both their open mouths.

On the walls of our house are rakkams, two Tretchikoff prints of a glass with droplets of water, a charcoal drawing of me when I was two. The soundscape of the street is encoded in my mind the way the first thing it sees is imprinted in a gosling's. In the wind, the rattling of a wooden gate. A series of dogs set one another barking at 1 AM. A car's wheels turning on a gravel driveway. The telephone ringing next door. Cups clattering on saucers in the kitchen sink.

Soundscape. Windscape. Mountainscape. Intoxicationscape. Two decades ago the man opposite was a merch—a merchant, a dealer, a neighbourhood supplier. Even before that, it was already a troubled house. Troubled children, inescapably part of the neighbourhood. Also part of the neighbourhood is the woman yelling at her husband, whom she caught in their car with an eighteen-year-old, what kind of man are you, and his mother yelling back, why are you asking him these questions? The rest of the street is trapped behind our curtains listening to this familiar story, and I hear the exact moment when it all becomes too much and she goes quiet.

The sound of a gate swinging free and banging into its post and latch, wood on metal.

The churches and the mosques in the old neighbourhoods are a secret architecture left after the cruel religion of apartheid removed their people to Athlone and other suburbs, even farther away. The people missed these unyielding bones, left behind in the places they could never go back to. In those times and now, religion is a secret we leaned on. New names replaced the old, Imam Haroon Road over Old Lansdowne Road, another activist murdered by apartheid. The earth shook at his funeral in protest. The bones of the churches and mosques remember us in the old places.

We leaned on religion and we leaned on beauty. Does anyone see the beauty in poor people's houses? The mouldings as perfect as those in churches, flowers in the front yard, neatness tended against great injustice. In the cluster of small tin homes near the Lansdowne post office, one person has made a garden, squeezing a little green into a promise of shelter and permanence. When I drive to the post office a year later, I see the city has given them better shelter, more permanent-looking though still small, and the gardens have been replaced by a cement fence. By the wide opening, a man is standing near a red velvet couch set at an angle to the street.

On Thornton Road—infamous for the Trojan Horse massacre, when apartheid soldiers hidden in a municipal truck killed protesting schoolchildren—my architect friend Noeleen points out that the tin house near the hairdresser dates to the nineteenth century. It's the kind of house that was built at that time by white men for their Black wives. It has the beginning of a fence around it but seems perpetually in transition, with only the bottom row of cement slabs laid between the posts. The tin house of Thornton and the tin houses of Lansdowne are still here, carrying their long histories, not entirely hidden behind a fence.

The sound of birds, sharp and agitated, but still beautiful, in the large acacia outside.

Belgravia is another Athlone business district. It has auto-mechanic shops, a church, a chemist, the famous roadhouse, and now an eye care centre several stories high. But mostly there are houses next to houses turned into businesses. And everywhere the search for safety shapes the architecture—fences, burglar bars, Trellidors across the doorways, high walls, barbed wire along upper surfaces. Cars park along the side of the streets as people pop into the shops. Things pulse and speed up here, though the cars slow down in the narrower space between the parked cars.

This is another Athlone.

I grew up in a house full of girls, and we were told stories, stories meant to frighten us, about a place for naughty boys called the School of Industry. It was either a school or a prison, we were never sure. The elision between school and prison was not an error in a time when, for young boys, all roads seemed to lead to Pollsmoor. The cycle of violence is well-known. But now there are some who teach at this “school,” who look directly into the eyes of young boys, visit their homes and parents often hundreds of kilometres away, tracing the path they've come to here. They too are making another Athlone. Doing the groundwork, preparing the soil.

To arrive at a finished landscape takes work. Someone has to do the groundwork, we say—the legwork, the preparation, the clearing of the ground. The word gains its force from the heavy, immovable earth, and from labor that is committed, long-term, unglamorous, invisible, and necessary. For the poet Rustum Kozain, who named his recent collection and his website with this word, groundwork is reading and writing.

When I left, I missed the food the most. Since then, longing has made me write about it and eventually learn to make it, and through food I ultimately reached into the ground, the first cleared ground, a garden.

In Cape Town, fifteen kilometres east on Klipfontein, gardens are not just practical

or beautiful accessories to the house. They are the reason for imperialism. The Company Gardens in the centre of the city are named for the vegetable rows planted by the slaves and burghers of the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch colony at the Cape was established in 1652 to provide fresh fruits, vegetables, meat, and water for ships trading in spices and slaves from the East. Gardens today drive the employment of lowly paid domestic-but-not-quite-house-workers.

To clear ground and make soil is to envision a future that you may never see. The temporality of a garden is of a different scale, an order of time that is not background. It requires our attention. It is the present and it is the deep past.

Along the side of my mother's house is an area that we call the vegetable patch, but it is by now an urban farm that is all of thirty square metres. It produces tomatoes, carrots, peppers, chilies, squash, lettuce, eggplants, beans, and all kinds of herbs. But it produces it out of soil that has taken forty-five years to nourish into fruitfulness. My role forty years ago, when I was a child and my parents had just moved to this place, was to take vegetable peels out to the compost heap. In this, I was central to this garden, though I didn't know it at the time.

Having left behind our "fruit trees" and "graves," we had to learn the stubbornness and refusals of the sand we inherited. It refused grass, it refused roses, though my father tried for years. My father, who was from Uitenhage in the Eastern Cape, looked after us children while my mother worked as a doctor, and, besides being a tailor, he grew vegetables, herbs, bougainvillea, and freesias. But his roses never flourished in this land, in the ancient sand of these Cape Flats. We eventually learned the ground's responsiveness, its long timetable. So we measure our forty-five years against a hundred thousand, and learn the timetable of the ground, the timetable of the garden.

Groundwork, necessary, invisible, profound, radical—it's the roots and below the roots. Over the decades, making this garden has made, for my family and me, like the people of Pfukani, a kind of belonging, not only a remembering of what we lost.

"Who would have thought you would find a garden like this in Athlone?" asked someone at the launch of my first book of poems, held at my mother's house. He couldn't imagine the Athlone where I'm from—this dreamscape that escapes all the road signs, this ghost Athlone and this real Athlone. The Athlone we've been growing all these years.