If I Could Talk  
by Tara Reyelts

If I could talk  
I would say my people mean no harm  
when they point at you  
and say, “mzungu, mzungu!”  
Please do not take offense.  
After all, they only call you  
white person, white person;  
my people have been called  
words much worse  
in your country.

If I could talk  
I would thank you for listening.  
I would ask you to listen closely  
for the murmur of my people’s  
mother tongues that are being choked  
out by your English and German.

I would tell you that I am more  
than a name,  
more than the combination  
of Tanganika and Zanzibar.  
I am also the savanna,  
the red dirt, the green hills;  
I am also the baobabs and acacia trees;  
I am the simba and the twiga and the tembo;  
I am Kili and Meru up which  
you climb and feel as though  
you have conquered them,  
conquered me.  
But if I could talk  
I would tell you you’re wrong.  
I have an unconquerable soul.

If I could talk  
I would speak to you  
who come and go in your  
mighty, silver jets;  
who touch down on my crimson soil;  
and when things get too uncomfortable,  
you who put on your headphones and escape  
to your American music—  
I see you drive through my towns,
drowning out the sounds of Karatu, Mto wa Mbu, and Babati with your iPods.

If I could talk
I would proudly raise my voice and tell you I am Tanzania.

If I could talk
I would speak in Swahili or perhaps one of my native Batntu. I would allow you to listen and learn, to give a little, like my people do when learning your strange Anglo sounds and syllables.

If I could talk
I would explain African time to you today, which really means next week. You smirk, looking down at me from atop your clock towers, but tell me why I need to hurry; tell me why I need to pass by my friend without having a conversation.

Are your people not as important as your time?

If I could talk
I would tell you that my people are more important to me than keeping appointments. When is the last time you met an appointment that had a soul?

If I could talk
I would remind you of the great sacrifices that my people have made for your comfort, your convenience, your Colonialism.

You were wrong to colonize me. Or maybe you were born into innocence, a generation or two after your ancestors raped, racketed,
and ravaged this land.
But all the same,
that Colonialism changed me,
burnt me,
bent me,
broke me.
Yes, I would tell you
I have been broken,
but I have not been overcome.

An Earnest man who long ago
visited my savannas and green hills
once told me,
“the world breaks everyone,
and afterward, some are
Strong
at the broken places.”

I have been Hemmed in by
your colonial Ways and laws
and I will not forget
that you have changed me.
But just as my wild thorns and vines have
overgrown
the ruins of old slave castles,
my untamable spirit will grow
up around your antiquated notions
of primeval and primitive peoples of
Africa.

I know that when you leave here,
when all that is left is the imprint
of your Nikes or Keens on my red dirt—
I know you will know better
than to call me primitive or backward.
Here you will find a kind heart
but I challenge you to find its darkness.

If I could talk
I would tell you how proud
I am to be Tanzania
and how welcome you are to travel here,
but most of all,
how glad I am that I too
have left an imprint on you.