NOTE
The award-winning play *Venus vs Modernity* unpacks the life of Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman of Khoi descent, who was exhibited as a freak show in nineteenth-century Europe under the name “Hottentot Venus.” At the peak of her fame in the early 1800s, Saartjie Baartman became a reference point for abolitionists, fashion designers, and political satirists alike. Her remains were dissected and put on display at the French National Museum for 150 years. In 2002, Saartjie Baartman was finally returned to the land of her birth.

SAARTJIE
When they exploded my universe
hauled me from my heart
To that place I hate
We’d walked enough steps
For my feet to weep
The first white man I’d ever smelled up close pulled a woman’s breast out of his pocket
I was fifteen
My wedding fires called them

VENUS
The soft breast had been dried with care
A once full milked moon
A baked brown nipple
It could have been mine
It held coins like the ones my father brought home to show us kids
Plucked stars
I said how do you eat stars Papa
How can people fight for stars
He said white men traded them for cattle
This is how our family eats
I survived because I did not want
My bits in anyone’s pocket
So I walked when others fell around me

SAARTJIE
After 9pm
There are no more people at the slave lodge
Everything below the neck is poes
A white man can trade the stars for terrors
No one speaks of this in the day
Soldier comes home with the sun
Smelling like a night of slaughters
Someone has to keep the cages closed
Keep the big men pinned down
Legs splayed
Shut their mouths
Someone has to wipe away the war in the cages

VENUS
Soldier is someone
Someone has to get the scraps
Like a pig who eats anything
Soldier eat
It’s your turn
Soldier

SAARTJIE
After 9pm
Everything below the neck is poes
The heart is poes
The breath is poes
The womb is poes
The child is poes
The father is poes
The mother is poes
The imam is poes
The blacksmith is poes
The seamstress is poes
The healer is poes
Soldier eat
It’s your turn
Soldier eat

VENUS
What you do to the land
To the sea
To the stream
What you do to the body
You do to me
What you waste in the water
What is left when you leave
What you kill
When you change
The very nature of the seed

There are no songs in the day
No songs in the streets
Cover up your head
No shoes on your feet
There are no husbands for wives
No feasts for the dead
When every family is broken
Who will remember what was said

In this home we have made
Of skin, heart and bones
In your hands made of clay
In your hands I am home
How do the hands that hold me
Hold the night moon made of screams
How do the hands that hold me
Feed the hell that we feel
How do the hands that hold me
Come together and pray
For the dream that comes to life
In the love where we lay
Where is the man that I love
When you leave this place
When you slave for the demons
And force a smile in their face
Who is the man that I love
Do you sometimes take a piece
Of the the body baas chews
While you kneel at his feet
Where is the man that I love
In this land of tears and blood
Where is the man that I love
Soldier *wailing*
Soldier *wailing*
Soldier eat
It's your turn
Soldier eat
HE GOT LOST

A poem from Venus vs Modernity

I wake up in the morning
I wear beauty as armour
Outside the front door is war
A neighbour sees a hippopotamus
A taxi driver sees sex
School children see a joke
I move past them
Back tall
Namas firm
Make-me-nice holding me back
Hoping that the person sitting next to me in the taxi won’t be fat
You can’t have two fat people together
Eyes everywhere at the mall praise, criticize and hate
Maybe they hate my hips
Maybe they hate my walk
“O sdudla se sexy!” (shout)
On tour I have to worry about walking
The elderly white couple gawking as I check into the flight
Walking down the aisle of the plane
Sideways
I can feel the familiar weight of laughter from behind

I am not normal anywhere
Every street, every building, every step is a stage
A courtroom
A battlefield
A spotlight
My skin is thick
My heart is thin
Gravity pulls worlds towards me
There are lips on my knees
Eyes on my back
Cannons on my bum
Poised for attack
The roar of my thighs  
Plagues the minds of many men  
I’m a living fantasy  
I leave them for dead

I once loved a man who was very very small  
I put him in my heart where I could keep him warm  
He loved the lights  
He loved my voice  
He loved the drama of the stage  
But when I took him home the love was not the same  
He got lost in the rolls  
He got high on my arse  
He tried to swim in my belly  
He did not have a plan  
For who I really am when no crowds are around  
He got lost in my meat  
He drowned in a song  
Weighed down by a persona  
We both carried for too long  
When I tried to take it off it was too much for him to bear  
The heaviness of the woman left when no audience is there  
He got lost in my arms  
He got buried in my breasts  
He suffocated in the oceans I carry in my chest  
He got lost in our home  
He crawled out into the streets  
He got lost between the bones of women skinnier than me  
For seven years I tried to hold him in the folds of my flesh  
Seven years of searching until my sanity left  
It takes guts  
It takes tears  
It takes a fuck shit mentality  
To know that I am sexy  
When every eye screams, “freak”  
I sing because there is a war being fought over my body  
My small lover says, “Usindwa nga masende la endlini”