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# Under the Tongue by Yvonne Vera

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### **WORLD LITERATURE IN REVIEW: ZIMBABWE**

#### **AFRICA & THE WEST INDIES**

Yvonne Vera. *Under the Tongue*. Harare. Baobab (African Books Collective, distr.). 1996 (released 1997). 113 pages. \$10/£6.25. ISBN 0-908311-93-1.

"Grandmother says it is sometimes good to forget, to bury the heavy things of now, the things which cannot be remembered without death becoming better than life." But survival lies in the speaking of silence, in the silence of voices beaten and lost, in the silence of "the many words a woman must swallow before she can learn to speak her sorrow and be heard," in the silence of grandmothers, mothers, and daughters.

Because she has produced four relatively short novels in six years, it is tempting to describe Yvonne Vera as a "newcomer"--that is, if brevity of time and output are the sole values for measuring literary merit. Yet, hardly profuse by any stretch of the imagination, it is the power of this comparatively small literary output that makes the "newcomer" label unsuitable. Witness the successive award-winning credits, national and international, that have propelled her seemingly from nowhere to center stage, beginning with her first work, *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (1992), a volume of short stories which, like her first and second novels *Nehanda* (1993; see WLT 69:1, p. 212) and *Without a Name* (1994; see WLT 70:3, p. 752), were short-listed for the Regional Commonwealth Writers Award in 1993 and 1994 respectively. *Without a Name* was the first-prize winner of the Zimbabwe Book Publishers Association annual literary awards. And now, with her third novel, *Under the Tongue*, and the 1997 Commonwealth Writers Award for best fiction tucked away, Vera has undoubtedly made her mark as Zimbabwe's leading female author.

If fellow Zimbabwean female writer Tsitsi Dangarembga has broached the subject of the fettered lives of rural and middle-class Zimbabwe women in *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Vera, in her four works of fiction, has engaged with consuming energy the victimization of the long-suffering rural Zimbabwe women who sit out the war amid the hardened brokenness of families and of communities shaped by the "din of mystery" of an oppressive township. Told through the tortuous lives of three generations of sewing, mat-making women, *Under the Tongue* chronicles the worst kind of abuse: incest. Committed by a returning war-veteran father on his own ten-year-old daughter, incest is the unspeakable silence, the agonizing word, the taboo term which must be kept "under the tongue." Finding its only escape through ten-year-old Zhizha's deepest interior monologue, the unsayable, silencing act is painfully, murmuringly articulated in the victim's simple but

bewildering words: "He puts mucus between my legs." Zhizha's only protection and balm come from Mother, whose own voice is shattered, "hidden and swallowed by the ground," and from Grandmother, who "protects" Zhizha with her weeping as she tells her of "the many places, the many sorrows, the many wounds women endure."

In typical, deeply cutting, terse, unpretentious poetic prose, Vera manipulates the English language in staggering metaphors of starkness and brokenness, as she relentlessly drives home the message of the nightmarish effects of misplaced hostilities toward women and children and the search for hope amid hopelessness. She concludes this harrowing tale of familial self-destruction with the novel's only authorial clarification: "In many ways they were convicts of a belief which had told them that to be merely human was enough, and that waiting was a reason enough to keep living. Few understand what maxims made living wholesome." Indeed, Vera's is the plangent voice of a chronicler and ardent social critic here to stay.

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