



CLOCK ME IF YOU CAN

BY THEMBA MABONA

THEMBA MABONA was born and bred in Switzerland. She studied Sociology & Anthropology at the U. of Zurich, Sociology at Francis College, and received her B.A. from Knox College and M.A. from the U. of Chicago. She spent 4 months in Berlin with a young Internet Startup doing marketing, 9 months in Cape Town doing Development Cooperation and interviewing both Youth and disadvantaged people from an alternative economy network (talent exchange). Presently she lives in Lucerne, waiting to land a job in journalism. She is most interested in contemporary literature from Switzerland, USA, South Africa, as well as Anthropology, studying alternative economics and anarchism (David Graeber). Other hobbies are running and badminton. Favourite reading: P. Roth, D. DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, F. Pessoa, U. K. LeGuin, I. Calvino, S. Bellow, Hugo Loetscher, Terry Eagleton, Nicholas Mosley, Max Frisch, Zakes Mda. Mabona has a blog in German & English: <http://themzini.wordpress.com>

Can you hear it too?

Agh, what a silly question, of

course you can't hear it. But in the beginning I didn't know. I mean, that's how it usually goes: we start out with a healthy dose of goodwill and faith in the world, believing in one thing or the other, then, as we run out into the wild, wild west of reality and, as far as our personal tally is concerned, our WIN-LOSS balance begins sliding to the right, we realize or let me be specific, I realize that maybe my goodwill, high hopes and great expectations might have been misplaced to begin with. But in this case not the world was at fault as I usually like to imagine but nobody, there is no blame to be assigned. I simply asked:

- Can you hear it too?

But folks looked at me strangely, as in

- What on earth are you talking

about? The traffic? The birds? Well no, I hear nothing in particular.

But I was hearing it. It was coming from beyond the horizon so that I couldn't help but ask others, however nutty it made me sound.

- Can you hear it too?

What I heard, loud and clear, was an ominous TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-

TOCK. We are likely to associate a regular sound with a ticking, distinct quality to it as indicating the passage of time and thus being indicative of a watch. So that's what it was to me, the loud ticking of an immense, threatening, invisible clock. Ticking off time towards I didn't know what calamity. But of course not knowing didn't mean not being able to speculate: how about a giant, world-ending bomb, miles underground, ticking insanely towards the apocalypse... The more evident thing to do was to assume that I was suffering from a minor auditory disorder or, if things were really bad, an insignificant variety of an usually even worse schizoid condition. However, this train of thought suggested that I should go see my doctor and after asking him, to be on the safe side, if he could hear it too, demand he refer me to the appropriate psychoanalyst.

I didn't totally dislike this idea of having my psyche checked out because 'The Sopranos' and reading Freud had given me this glorified notion about having sessions at what we call 'the soul plumber' [not such a bad expression if you think about all the shit clogging up your subconscious]. In particular the idea of reclining on a huge leather couch and non-stop going off about myself and what could it all mean and "Oh, I'm so grandly symbolic/ archetypical" etc. was the main draw for me. The pampering of the old, childish instinct that the whole world is created around oneself and no one but oneself. But before I even got so far as my doctor's practice considerable doubts assailed me:

A) Did my health insurance really cover this?

B) What if I was indeed going nuts? Did I really want to know this? Wasn't it nicer slowly, blissfully slouching towards bedlam and then dealing with convulsive electro-shock therapy when I get there?

C) What if the therapist indeed, as fantasy would have it, was drop-dead gorgeous and all these sessions just devolved into me indulging all types of insalubrious sexual fantasies with the additional masochist twist that I was unlikely to land with the therapist [of course only due to her professional ethical standards so that she too, sub rosa, would be suffering from secret pangs of lust, abandon, desire].

D) What if there was actually something to the TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK and for whatever unlikely designs I, Benedict Foster Fanon, was the only person to be able to hear it and play savior of the world or whatever the hidden metronome demanded of its unlikely hero? Awgh, there were just too many open questions that would have been shut down by frequenting a shrink and so swallowing empty and biting down hard on my caries-riddled molars I decided to get to the bottom of this all by my incompetent self. For good or bad or incredibly worse. I stumbled upon "Midnight's Children" and for a few fleeting days I gave myself up to the delusion that I too was fatefully intertwined if not with

my country and its mythology then at least history, the vast movements of humankind, the final rising of the post-industrial proletariat of which I was to play a key role. So in full crazy-mode I would open the mailbox in the morning half-awaiting a thick envelope with my heroic, neo-marxist script in it. It was sweet make-believe, “as if” at its finest, but exhilarating while it lasted.

Finally, one Monday when I actually had the awareness to realize that it was Monday, the start of the dreadful, eternal cycle of wage slavery, I decided to once again act conscientiously like I were employed and went to check my day planner. As you could imagine finding the day planner, the least used and most disabused object in my tiny inventory of possessions, was a heck of a job. When at last, nearing exhaustion, I had the good fortune of finding it at the bottom of the laundry bag smelling of club smoke, soccer pitch, weeks of sweat and worse, I opened it with a sense of apprehension that there might be some momentous appointment that I had willingly forgotten about.

I flipped through its pages.

The ones from earlier in the year were indeed full of appointments and to-do lists. This concept of having a day planned out with things to be accomplished and checked in my state of non-linearity struck me as something very bizarre. In the fullness of time I arrived on the Monday in question and, a shock to my system, there was indeed written down an appointment for that day: 10:15 RAV. Now in case you’re unfamiliar with our country the RAV can be sort of rough depending on your personal advisor. The idea is pretty basic: trust is good, control is even better.

You meet with your advisor who in 8 out of 10 cases cannot help you due to an army of reserve labor, etc. But of course you don’t get into any ideological debates on these occasions. Instead you get this subtle or not so subtle suggestions that you are a parasite of society [try thinking of yourself as a tic sucking on a scalp and see how that soothes your ego] and that you should change your ways, write more applications, make a bigger effort, put on a wider smile, go turn tricks, repent and reform, whatever it takes.

But such was my lot for the day. To sally forth to the outskirts of town to the most derelict street there is, scuttle up the hill towards the steep cliff against which the administrative building is huddled like a modern-day leper colony. There I would exchange a few pronouncements of my willingness to write further applications for the advisor’s acknowledgement of these efforts. Some of the advisors would just have you get a telemarketing gig in one hot second but you find ways to forestall this dreadful option for a couple of months before you give in to the titani-

um-grade realities of the job market.

But then a most unexpected thing happened. As I sat on the trolley and it made its way down the bank of the dark green river, the ticking became louder and louder. Hearing this I felt optimistic that I might still get to the bottom of it all. I turned in the direction of our medieval battlements, thinking they are more than symbolic enough of our town [and thus my existence] to be the keepers of the secret clock. But we passed by them without the keen dopplering in- and decrease in pitch that would have confirmed my supposition.

A few minutes later as I walked towards the grey, ugly, trash-strewn cliff, the regular reverberation of the mystical metronome increased to a booming pitch so that I tarried a while to look all around me. Then I took the stairs to the fourth floor and entered the office’s grey-in-grey desolation. The lady at the entry desk who was typing in data with a professional smile on her face was unconcerned so I knew she surely couldn’t hear the deafening clock.

- And you are Mister?

- Oh. Fanon. I’m Benedict Fanon. I’m here to see.... sorry, I forget the name, I’m really terrible with names. It’s embarrassing.

- No problem. Fanon? Let me quickly have a look. Oh, there, Office #12, Ms.Theiling. Please have a seat.

- Do you mind if I take some of these? [I’m pointing at the job application effort forms]

- Not at all. Help yourself to as many as you want.

The fact that she is genuinely upbeat despite the institutionally somber environment never ceases to catch me off guard. I always think: yes, I want to be emotionally like her, unimpressed by my environs, fed by an inner fire nobody can see, much less comprehend.

Ms. Theiling was late and so the admin lady told me to go ahead. I did. The view from the office, as usual, swallowed me alive: you can see the green, apartment speckled hind-hills of the city, the medieval wall making its way up the incline, encircling the old, scenic part of the city like a turreted necklace. Down to the right of this flows the river, some whitecaps, a large construction site, crossed by wooden and concrete bridges.

But this time I was not so much checking the view as examining in a last ditch effort the window panes themselves: if the TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK was a part of reality then these sheets of glass should have been in sympathetic vibration. I walked over to the sill, apprehensive, put my hand on the cold pane: nothing. I sighed. It was me. I was losing it. I would have to learn to either live with the unforgiving loud chronometer or board the boat of fools, neither of which particu-

larly appealed to me.

Then something at the very edge of my vision caught my attention and I turned to my right. Just below the windowsill protruding at the height of my knees was a small, rusty latch. I turned around to check if Ms. Theiling was opening the door yet, which she wasn't. In a flash I bent down and pulled the latch so that a dwarf-sized doorlet opened squeakily. Behind it there was a metallic... chute or tunnel approximately twice my diameter at the hip sloping downwards steeply, the kind of gradient that, had it not been for the darkness that cut vision off after a few meters, would have given me a bout of vertigo. The miserable ticking of the clock was coming from down there reducing my range of possibilities to one, death-defying option: fling myself down the chute! Unemployment pay sanctions or no. I cast one last, wistful glance upon town then awkwardly inserted myself into the tube and slid forth into the unknown. The first couple of meters were slow so I still was able to gather my faculties about me and do some speculating as to what all this signified. At first I was of a mind to think of it as an abandoned helvetic military lunacy, that is, one of the uncountable tunnels they had drilled into rock during the defensive panic of WWII... but then why would it be attached to a RAV office? Next, I considered that government employees avail themselves of outlandish perks the average citizen cannot even imagine and this slide would simply exit next to the parking slot of my advisor. As I accelerated downwards and the TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK yet increased to a point where I was convinced I shouldn't even still be able to hear it because it should have long since destroyed my snailish inner ear, I indulged one last fancy: that this steeply twisting tunnel was of the "Alice In Wonderland" variety and I would exit into a complete fantasyland, a realm full of adventure. Though, evidently, this scenario would also have implied that I was indeed be perfectly insane, imagining stuff.

Accompanied by the unchanging tick I corkscrewed into the depths of that long-ago Monday. Finally, with a resounding "SCHLUNGH" I was flung into thin air, sailed for a second and landed in an pile of unknown stuff. The texture of the encompassing material felt very familiar and when I moved so did the rustle it made. Here the TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK was at its loudest. I was in a cubical, badly lit room overflowing with A4 sheets of paper. I picked one up at random and studied it:

Benedict F. Fanon
Tiger Plaza 21
9004 Lucerne
benfan@gmail.com

CPS Personal AG
Samuel Illi
Kanonenallee 91
70 003 Altra Luna

Lucerne, Nevuary 9th, 2009

- Oh!

Was all I could say in my astonishment. I leaved through the vast pile but each sheet was either of the variety above or it had a company logo in the upper right and some lines of a variation on

"[...] thanks again for your interest in our company. We received an unexpectedly large volume of applications. Thus we were able to select a candidate even more closely matching our profile for the position. Please do not interpret this to mean that you are less [...] We hope that you will soon find a new challenge that matches your needs and [...]"

Only these two types of letters with both of which I was heart-breakingly familiar with. But instead of sinking to a new all-time low this room full of futile trial and error encouraged me, refueled my foolish hopes. And there was after all still the mystery of the TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK to be resolved.

I began scrambling through the pile of processed pulp like a mad hatter in search of his lost timepiece, desperate and non-methodical. Soon enough my search paid off as my foot somewhere below the raging sea of paper struck a solid object. I dove down and came up with a sizable grey and black, rectangular box the face of which was a huge black display with neon-yellow digits:

01 years / 08 months / 23 days / 09 hours / 44 minutes / 16 seconds
Above the digits I was informed what this was all about, what persona I was to perform in the great play of history. It said: Time until Full-Scale Ejection of Benedict Foster Fanon from Standard Helvetic Society.

- Ha! Hahahahaha!

I laughed from the bottom of my belly but in true scorn. For a surreal, obscure clock to function as though it could tick off my fate, how laughable!

- Never!

I yelled.

- I will keep my own time!

And hurled the chronopathic box at the nearest wall where it burst into a thousand useless pieces and the obnoxious TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK-TICK-TOCK came to a stop. I felt my symbolic status as a parasite poof and vanish.

- Take that!

I screamed triumphantly both my middle fingers extended in the direction of the disintegrated clock. I calmed down shortly and began looking about for an exit. The entry was too high above ground for me to get back into. However, there was another circular opening in the opposite wall and I pulled myself strenuously up into it.

Suffice it to say that the way back was incredibly long and bothersome, at times I got picked at by mechanical arms swooping down upon me from the dark recesses of the confined tunnels. A few times I peeked through potential openings but the grey offices that I saw and the heavily technical HR jargon issuing from them scared me back into the oblivion of the tunnel. For a while I even thought that forever worming my way through the tunnels would be my punishment for destroying the dastardly timepiece. But no.

Where the tunnel became darkest and I was just about ready to lie down and call it a life, I saw an outline of light I hadn't come across before. I inched forward on my elbows and knees with the last of my remaining energies, arrived at the luminescent portal, pushed it open and beheld not sickly office- but daylight! I hauled myself out of the pitch-black passage into the light of a new day. I turned around and beheld, to little or no astonishment, the post office across from our apartment block.