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Chevrons

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CHEVRONS

Nomatter wore the wool dress even though it was January and the undersides of the pink sleeves were red with her sweat. She almost had an automobile ride for each finger of her hand: once in the Grain-Marketing-Board truck, once in a *combi* to buy the dress, once with the missionary who said "Nomatter" was a silly, native name. On her pointer finger, her fourth time, she rode a school bus to see Great Zimbabwe. The new country's heart. Or the old country's? Teacher said the mortarless stone walls of Great Zimbabwe existed long before Rhodes and Smith. An African Empire. Whites claimed that Arabs had built the ancient city.

Now the dress is a rag. Meikles, the store where her mother bought it, is empty and dark except for a backroom where an Indian fixes white people's hair.

Nomatter tries to remember her trip to the stone city rising from the hills of Masvingo as her boss, Mr. Cook, tells her that Zimbabwe is a failed state and was better as Rhodesia. Did he ever visit Great Zimbabwe? And the little museum with birds made of soapstone, which her teacher called "soft rock" but felt hard and smooth against her palm? Mr. Cook says he's leaving for Mozambique to start another banana farm.

"Nancy, you can be someone else's house girl."

She tells him her name is Nomatter, but he misunderstands. He says "stiff upper lip" and walks out of the kitchen, his work boots creaking against the green linoleum. She wishes he had seen the ruins, or even the postcard she bought with the coins her mother had given her, when her mother worked for coins and coins still existed, before inflation and breadlines.

Nomatter had placed the coins on the glass counter of the museum and received the postcard in a brown paper bag. Her

mother wedged the postcard behind the clock that didn't tick. She asked why a picture of a plain wall and not Great Zimbabwe's famous tower, the tower on President Mugabe's re-election T-shirts year after year. Thirty years in power. But Nomatter loved the wall not the tower. The wall continued out of sight. The children ran around the tower; the wall encircled them.

Teacher said the stones were falling down, yet the wall still rose higher than Nharira Primary's asbestos roof. Tilted stones around the top created two rows of triangles, one row on top of the other, as endless as the wall. Her teacher called them "chevrons." The design reminded Nomatter of the worn *zambia* that had held her close to her mother's back when she was small. She followed the chevrons around and around the wall, wondering if the triangles, fit perfectly together, were meant to point up or down.

Now, watching Mr. Cook leave, she wonders if this is a beginning or end. No, she feels. It continues. Even when everyone thought the wall crumbled, it went on and on, up and down like the chevrons of its crown.