

VOLUME 2 • 2020

# IHRAF PUBLISHES

**CLAY BANGLES –**  
**(PART OF INDIAN CULTURE)**  
**BY DR. TERA RAMESH BABU**

Bangles are emblematic of Indian culture;  
Seem in iridescent and shimmering;  
On the hands of neonates and bambinos  
Who be in a wavering cradle by harking lullaby.

Bangles are symbolic of Indian culture;  
As a part of custom both spinsters and,  
Married women wear; not just mere ornaments;  
As bangles are part of lasses identity.

Bangles are significance of Indian culture;  
As spinsters wearing orange colour;  
This signifies success and blissful life;  
And makes funky noise in and out.

Bangles are tradition of Indian culture;  
The brides wearing green colour that represents  
A new life, a streak of luck and fertility;  
As red signifies energy and prosperity.

Bangles are custom of Indian culture;  
As newly wedded sheilas wear bangles;  
This creates melodious aura around  
And safeguard them from evil spells.

**JUSTICE IS**  
**BY KATHRYN LEONARD-PECK**

Justice is  
finding a peach in the fridge on a hot June day, and sharing it.  
Justice is a fruit bowl  
where everyone gets a grape.  
Justice is a baby bird, tumbled from the nest, while the cats circle.  
So delicate, bones like glass, breath like a thimble.  
Justice is a hand  
reaching out,  
cradling her,  
like she could be somebody's baby, not just some stupid bird.  
Justice puts her back in the soft warm nest. Justice is up-drafting the feathers.

Justice is an artist,  
justice is a band,  
still dancing  
even if the rhythm skips.  
Justice is guitar chords,  
pressed flat til your fingers seep. Resonate the stadium,  
beat sound our giant heart. Justice is the stamp of fate, a lion startled by a cloud. Justice  
is dreaming feet,  
a pact signed triple in hot blood, pulsing, pounding,  
worrying the bone,  
proud-marching forward, tracking everybody's time.  
Justice is an old dog in the street, shuffling, sniffing, belly slung low, nose sly in the dirt,  
following a smell only he can track, following the scent  
till he circumnavigates the world.  
Justice is  
one yellow dog that just won't quit.

## **MY JOURNEY THROUGH THORNS**

**BY NEHA KUMARI**

Please no, do not beat, no no no!

I beg, don't hit me!

I yelled while Ritesh and her mother was incessant battering and abusing me. I shivered as if my world turned antagonistic towards me. Hardly had I imagined my marriage to hold egregious mould. I am wont to these torments and affliction. It started after a month of my marriage. I still remember my Mata Ji (Ritesh's mother) poured hot oil on my palm to teach me a lesson.

I, being the daughter in law must adhere to the regiment of in-law's house. To arouse ahead of scheduled time was one among them. I became inefficacious to schlep my obligations waking up late at 5:30 am, one-hour delay from requisite time to prepare breakfast. Hence I was burned; it was my first spectacle of tolerance in my in-law's house. Ritesh perceived the situation and scolded me for not getting up early. I cried on my destiny, on me and my circumstances.

I tied the knot with Ritesh on July 15, 2010, in my hometown Ranchi, Jharkhand, India with hope and trust that he will treat me with love, care and revere. My marriage was Cinderella-like, full of extravagance, as I am the only daughter of my parents. My father proffered a sum of fifteen lakhs and a car as demanded by Ritesh's family for marriage. In my father's house, I was brought up with love, affection and care. My school and college days were the happiest days of my life. I was a sincere and brilliant student, passionate to learn and explore. I got admitted to the computer science stream and dreamed to pursue my career in Artificial Intelligence. It shattered when my father suffered Brain Haemorrhage that slackens his survival rate. In our culture, a girl can be prosperous and

dignified when she marries. Hence I became subject to marriage when I was in B.Tec 4th year in Computer Science and Engineering stream.

Machines are human-made; man forgets karma too is human-made. He pretermits to act like a human, Ritesh correlates this. After a few months of my marriage, my father demised. Hence it turned difficult for me to express my situation to anyone. My mother grieved and a few days later she too deceased, leaving me aloof for my upcoming struggles. My heartache, it became unbearable to withstand the loss of my mother and father. Ritesh and his family hardly bothered about my sentiments. Every daiy I was subject to torment and treated no less than a slave in the hands of my husband and his mother. They usually beat me for reasons like... food not being spicy, for taking afternoon nap, not cleaning the home and utensils properly, talking on the phone and many more. Sometimes I wonder why my family hates me, I tried the best possible way to make them happy, but in vain. They loved to beat me, insult me in front of neighbours, relatives and friends. I tolerated everything reticently. One night Ritesh came home drunk, after leaving mother in law to her brother's house. As soon as he entered, I was terrified, hence argued with him for not being in senses. He yelled slangs, caught my hair and thrashed me consecutively four times on the wall. I remember a few neighbours entered our house after hearing the shouts. He hit my head on the wall for the first time; blood ran from my head through eyes, nose and mouth. I felt, as if I lost my breath, hence I lost my consciousness.

I opened my eyes, lying on the hospital bed. Stitches were on my forehead, near cheeks and chin. My face was injured, full of scars, and I suffered a miscarriage. I saw my mother in law weeping and cursing me for miscarriage. Heart-broken I lay in bed on a white sheet, resembling the death of my happiness. I felt what is the purpose of my life? Only to live under utmost pain and torture. Loss of my unborn child made me feel worthless to live. Suicidal thoughts tormented me. Everyone welcomes the sun with a ray of hope, happiness and zeal to live. In my case things were different, every night I pray not to see the morning, every morning I pray not to see the night. I am left with no one to love and be loved, my father, mother and child died. I am still alive to bear the tortures in the hands of Ritesh and his mother. Once I tried to run out of my house, in vain. I was caught and beaten. Ritesh punched on my face four times till I fall on the ground, and hit with his leg on my stomach and grabbed my hair dragging me in my room; hence he closed the door from outside. He said "Somie we will not allow you to spoil our stature. If ever you tried such stunt, I will cut you to pieces."

My mother in law wanted to bring a new bride for Ritesh as I was sterile. So she wanted a daughter in law who can produce children for her son. Her plan turned unsuccessful, as Ritesh has to divorce me before he marries another girl. When I heard this, I was thrilled—the best chance for me to get out of this cage. I am a woman; I too felt concerned for the girl who will be newlywed to Ritesh.

One day suddenly I fainted while working in kitchen, later it was discovered that I am pregnant. This time I was worried about my child. I do not want my child to nurture in the environment where her mother being whipped and treated worse than a slave. My

mother in law desperately wanted the child. She gave six times food to eat as suggested by the doctor. My life changed with the coming of this child for a short duration.

On October 19, 2015, I gave birth to a baby boy. On the same date, Ritesh married a 16-year-old girl Alysha, divorcing me. I was determined to leave this house with my newborn child. But Ritesh snatched my child from me. Hit me with a rod on my head, till I lost consciousness.

After a year and a half, I woke up in the hospital. I was unconscious for a long duration. I remembered everything that was done to me. The police came to investigate what happened if I remember anything. I answered "I have lost faith in everyone, I want my child. Hence I narrated my past to him. He noted my statement."

Police stated I am mentally unfit. Only after investigation, I can get the assurance to justice.

Ritesh was informed about my recovery. He was called by police for inquiry. He lied and said "Somie is a characterless woman. I don't know whether this is my child or someone else. One of her lovers hit her on the head after her childbirth and ran away. She is admitted to this Government Hospital. We took care of her child. Now we are attached to this baby, and we love him. She is mad; she cannot take care of her. She has no financial support. How she will nourish the child."

Hence, denying an investigation of any kind. I was declared characterless, mentally unfit to nourish my child.

Ritesh said "Don't dare to open your mouth or else your child will face the consequences. I will kill him."

Yes, I suffered many afflictions. But I want my child back. During this juncture, Richa, who worked as a nurse in the same hospital I was admitted has helped me. She sympathized me, sheltered me and gave hope to get my child back from devils. I understood the importance of financial independence. I went to different companies for seeking a job. After much struggle, I managed get a job in IT Company. I was happy, and I felt my life would change soon after the arrival of my son.

This time I will not surrender I am fighting for my child. I am his mother, and he is the only hope for me to survive. I went to the police station to file complain against my mother in law and Ritesh, under Section 498-A Indian Penal Code for cruelty committed by them, Section 509 IPC for insulting my modesty, Section 306 IPC, for torturing, and Domestic Violence Act, 2005 for all devilish act of beating, burning, insulting. I told police if anything happens to my child in the process of investigation and seeking justice, Ritesh and his family will be solely responsible.

I suffered a lot, Ritesh has put me to death, imprisoned me in his home, took my child away, laid false accusation. Not now, I am ready to face everything for my child. I have a firm belief in me. Stop me if you can, submerge me in adversity I will emerge compellingly. Hence after fair trials, I got my child back. The justice granted stringent punishment to the guilty, and utmost happiness to me. Hardly I can convey the feelings when I hugged my child and kissed him with tears. A mother is a mother, irreplaceable. A felicitous journey begins with new anticipation and sanguineness.

## VIGIL FOR THE CAMPS

BY AIREA JOHNSON, CHEYENNE KOTH, LIZ ROBBINS AND LAUREN TIVEY

*The U.S. has held a record 69,550 migrant children in government custody in 2019.*

- Associated Press, November 12, 2019

*There was earth inside them, and  
they dug.*

*They dug and dug, and so  
their day went past, their night. And they did not praise God,  
who, so they heard, wanted all this,  
who, so they heard, witnessed all this.*  
- Paul Celan, "There Was Earth"

### 1. Kingdom of Ashes

Silent, brooding, Azrael perches atop a chain-link fence, his feathers coated in fine red dust. He gazes at the horizon, the point where

tawny desert meets azure sky, waiting for the children to emerge from their tents into the enclosure, no more than an animal pen.

Restless, he quivers his grand wings, adjusts his haunches, remembering the girl, a month earlier found unresponsive from viral complications;

the lack of medicine, shrugs of the guards. His unseen hand on her hot forehead, his impotence, his rage against the mortals who

allowed it to happen. Tensions strung tight, as names of the dead flash back: Juan, Jakelin, Darlyn, Wilmer, Carlos, and more. A helicopter

shudders overhead, blades kicking dirt and trash against the fence. Still, days outside in the elements better than nights in cages, under harsh

fluorescence, with the unspeakable acts that transpire, the human demons sneaking in to reach the sleeping, the dreaming, under their crinkling

solar blankets, before he can intervene—all he can do is swoop down, remove consciousness from the limp husks of their bodies, wrapping them,

such fledgling wisps, in his radiant embrace, divine light, singing lullabies, whispering *do not look, child, listen to my voice, do not look, dear one.*

The archangel trembles with fury, deliberating God's criminal silence,  
the cold blast of His indifference, never deigning to lift a celestial finger,  
to intervene. God, who lost interest in the hominids long ago. And Azrael,  
who saw all this before in different lands, who cannot be everywhere at once,

who cannot bear it any longer, who pleads upon deaf ears. Better to call  
upon his brother of light, Lucifer, warden and punisher of the damned, who

foresaw the apathy of the Father, who rebelled, who fell. Meanwhile,  
real monsters stalk the earth, ravenous, incessant, inflicting woe upon woe,

as Azrael's anxiety claws at the edges of reason, knowing he cannot  
stay ahead of the evil, though he is supposed to have hope, an angel

is supposed to have hope, is supposed to be a flame shining in a tunnel,  
or a flashing sword in the face of injustice, evidence of good in the world.

He despairs, having witnessed too much. The children spill into the yard,  
frail, washed out, lethargic, but the sun warming them. He knows they will not

all make it—their parents ripped away—souls cracked, enduring their own  
private Hells. He has only this small circle of warmth to offer, knowing

it is not enough, will never be enough, in this, Yahweh's dominion of shame.  
Better to call on the fallen one, his better sense, tell him: *burn it all to the ground.*

- Lauren Tivey

## 2. God's Governance

*Persons who violate the law of our nation are subject to prosecution ... I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13 to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for his purposes.*

- Jeff Sessions, former U.S. Attorney General

With lines from Romans 13, and real accounts from migrant children.

- "Hear the Words of Detained Migrant Children," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2019.

*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.*

I am seven years old, I am from El Salvador.

*Whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.*

We came to the US because there were  
people who wanted to hurt us.  
*Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.*

I was wet when I got here and was placed  
in the cage without being given dry clothes.  
*Do what is good, and you will receive his approval for he is  
God's servant for your good.*

I've woken up in the middle of the night hungry, but  
I'm too scared to ask for any more food.

*If you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain.*  
We can't sleep because every 20 minutes  
the guards are yelling, *GET UP!*  
*He is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's  
wrath on the wrongdoer.*  
They separated me from my dad,  
I have not seen my father again.  
*One must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also  
for the sake of conscience.*  
I haven't bathed for 21 days.  
*Respect to whom respect is owed, honor to  
whom honor is owed.*  
I would like to get some fresh air.  
- Aireia Johnson

### 3. I Witness You

In you, little face behind chain link—  
greasy at the seams and rotting within,  
I see the large scale atrophy of the soul:  
cold, tiny ankles beneath mylar.  
I do not know you—I am not God, I cannot  
hear your prayers or cast guiding light.  
I am a person, a student. A cynic, even.  
But like God, I do witness you.  
In this place of deception, people are mired  
in misdirection. Convinced of an inhuman  
binary. Red and blue. You are used  
to keep me in fear of my neighbor.  
Who, if I asked them,  
would never lock a child in a cage.



We witness you in pixels passing. Suffering  
child's face obscured by ads and ever-moving  
text. Between one frivolity and the next.  
Things don't change.  
Because circumstances here are brittle:  
unchanging, unknowing. Safety  
will do that to you. How might this poem change  
if it were my duty to keep you detained?  
None of us can conceive of The Ultimate.  
Least of all surrounded as we are by screens  
of smoke—I try to touch that truth with my words,  
to weigh what I see with what I know.  
When you are free, voiceful again,  
what truths will you tell?

- Cheyenne Koth

#### 4. Items Confiscated from Migrants at the Southern Border

- after Tom Kiefer's art series, "El Sueno Americano: The American Dream"

Colgate toothpaste  
Rusty nail clippers  
Zest soap  
Dirt-caked rubber ducks  
Gerber baby food  
Disney princess coin purse  
Hello Kitty compact mirror  
Hot Wheel cars  
Mickey Mouse sweatshirt  
Tarnished wedding ring  
Condoms  
*Abuelita's* rosary beads  
Duct taped water bottles  
Shoelaces and steel-toed boots  
Dented tuna cans  
Soiled gloves  
Needle and thread  
U.S. Blood Donor T-shirt  
*Nuevo Testamentos*

- Aireia Johnson

#### 5. There Will Come Salvation

*Suffer me not to be separated  
And let my cry come unto Thee.*

- T.S. Eliot, "Ash Wednesday"

We cross mountains, deserts, rivers, navigating by stars, shielded by angels. We walk and we walk in the night, hidden by shadows, the sun dormant, coyotes whining in the distance, snakes slumbering in their holes. We are not alone: God is in the land. God is in us.

*Earth, our skin.*

*Water, our blood.*

*Air, our dreams.*

*Fire, our hearts.*

We take the children from one grinding jaw of pain, to find another waiting at the great fence, with its searchlights, its dogs, its razor wire. Still, we hold hope. We grasp it like a warm stone, and it comforts us in dark times. God is always with us, does not leave us wanting, without solace; He guides and protects. Though others are losing faith, are murmuring to one another:

*God has forgotten us.*

*God has turned his back.*

*Where is He? Where is God?*

*Dios esta muerto*, come the replies.

Hear us, O quiet one, in this time of desperation. Separate us not from You, as our own children have been separated from us. We have come so far, have endured such hardship; we dig in the loam looking for You, but perhaps the rumors are true: *Dios esta muerto*.

We dig in the ground, losing faith by the handful. We dig, finding only ourselves.

- Lauren Tivey

## 6. Father

*Far from Love the Heavenly Father*

*Leads the Chosen Child,*

*Oftener through Realm of Briar*

*Than the Meadow mild.*

- Emily Dickinson, "Far from Love the Heavenly Father"

Cold on the cement floor, covered by the silver blanket used by five others before me, I lie awake all night. Far away or maybe feet from me lies my young son. I imagine I hear him crying in fear, feel his shivering. What could it matter to anyone but me? Maybe his dark fate is exactly what I deserve, who I am. All my life, my mother called me *deprimido*, and it's true: I wrestle with what is, I struggle to be happy. Perhaps no one cares that I brought us to this state, to the edge of a glorious land, ready to drive new squash plants into the ground. I brought us here, I. Father, patriarch, symbolic god of family. And in me, have they now slipped in faith? Might they, instead, have found a thorny truth in suffering?

For even when we're released, if we are, we'll bury our memory of this sorrow, in order to make room for more. Forgetting, suffering, that cycle—that's the habit of humanity. In recent years, I gave up God, rejoiced in the vast space of a lawless now. But with His loss came denial of consolation: if no justice now, here on Earth, no justice later, after we're gone. Yes, long ago, as a believer, I could endure better the terrible fear, the persistent night of any cage. Now, here in this place, I dream: the wheat fields on the other side that could again be rimmed in gold. What if I were to bring God back, shove down shadowy doubt? Deep inside His indifference, His cool turning away, must be the sun, the heart of everything, where winged illusion can triumph like a swath of blue sky. Deep inside my indifference, my cool turning away, must lie freedom's greenest shoots, breaking out just now from earth.

- Liz Robbins

### **ABSCONDING HUMANITY**

**BY TABASSUM TAHMINA SHAGUFTA HUSSEIN**

*(IHRAF International Fellow 2020)*

I call you by your name.  
But you seem to be found nowhere these days.  
When men women are lynched to death,  
Killed in the street in broad daylight.  
Millennials are busy recording the heinous acts.  
Competition!!!!!!!!!!!!!!  
Who can post first in social media?  
After posting, then?  
Storm in social media.  
Known as "viral".  
Debate after debate, discussions,  
For weeks.  
Then?  
The rest is silence.  
Then another viral and the previous is lost among countless viral.  
We are self-obsessed, self-absorbed and selfish creatures,  
Still known as Humans.  
Are we not Nietzsche' the last man?  
Come and show your face Humanity.  
How long can you hide to see the fall of human conscience?  
Face and stand up.  
Come out, be in the hearts of the humans.  
Make them feel compassion.  
Come back to this wasteland, Humanity.  
Rise and be in the hearts of the people.

Let them speak for the voiceless.  
We are becoming mute, deaf and blind.  
Engulf us.  
Show yourself.  
Time for hiding has been gone for too long.  
Come and reside again,  
Or prepare to be lost in the oblivion.

**WHAT MISTRANSLATION LOST**  
**BY CATHERINE LEE**

*O, Birther of the Cosmos,  
focus your light within us — make it useful  
Create your reign of unity now  
Your one desire then acts with ours,  
As in all light,  
So in all forms,  
Grant us what we need each day in bread and insight:  
Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,  
As we release the strands we hold of other's guilt.  
Don't let surface things delude us,  
But free us from what holds us back.  
From you is born all ruling will,  
The power and the life to do,  
The song that beautifies all,  
From age to age it renews.  
I affirm this with my whole being.*

Fresh echoes of familiar supplications were intoned originally in Aramaic.  
Yet Nazareth-born, thus brown-complected Savior's native tongue  
installed no Lord within this prayer.  
Rather find a Birther (not one concerned with paper proof of birthplace)  
Birther of the Cosmos, being obvious who does this:  
Hallowed is this maiden's name.  
Instead of reign of blessed unity, we've been plagued with kingdom come,  
with glory, power, willful acts of domination separating earth away  
from heaven for all conceiving time.  
Did you know that birdsong matches planetary music generating deep in space?  
Resounds on earth what sings of heaven.  
We got bread (and circuses) but lost the insight we so desperately need.  
Notice how external fault, temptation, redirects responsibility from we  
who should be choosing not to judge our own or others' errors.  
In the native tongue of Eashoa' M'sheekha (Jesus the Anointed One)

comes clarity in revelation, declaration who—alone—intends to make the call.  
Timeworn proclamations of a jealous patriarch, architecting his idea of  
God in own exalted image, reserving for himself the freedoms to  
redact, mansplain, disseminate intentioned mistranslation.  
What clergymen required us as children memorize  
can be re-visioned as its ancient song reveals  
I AM a HUman being,  
of many different colors,  
I vibrate harmony of love of all.  
I intone what prayer renews  
indigenous belief.  
Namasté

## **ESCAPE**

**BY PAULA RUDNICK**

On Jan. 7, 2020 the body of a 10-year-old was found in the landing gear of an Air France flight from Ivory Coast.

Since 1947, over 126 people have attempted to stow away in this fashion. Most did not survive.

No first class faux leather amenity kit  
No pre-taxi business class champagne  
No mini economy pretzels  
No pressurized view of clouds  
Just waves of heat on rippled asphalt  
Engines idling before final roar  
Blood slapping skull like it's a bongo  
Lungs packed tight with discharged fuel  
No attention paid to safety features of the aircraft  
No life vest located in the armrest on the left  
Just hollow cheeks on love's lost faces  
Streams of sorrow souring cocoa sweet  
Sweaty chocolate raising weeping blisters  
Forearms scarred in mists of DDT  
Just palms scab-hardened by machete  
Just stomach acid-washing childhood dreams  
No seatback in full upright position for departure  
No belt to buckle when the light comes on  
Just mind scrubbed clean to what is coming  
Heartbeat wicking juice from thickened tongue  
Eyes red-rivered under eyelids  
Rifle bruise a souvenir on ribs

Just feet tucked stiffly into haunches  
In the sooty space four one-ton tires retract  
On an Air France Airbus bound from Ivory Coast to Paris  
To escape the bitter taste of Hershey's kiss.

**UNTIL ALL OF THE HOLY LAND RINGS OUT  
BY JOY ARBOR**

As if a group of soldiers sick and tired  
at Kalandia checkpoint, instead of scrutinizing  
people's faces and papers, searching  
car trunks, decided to cross the streets  
go into Ramallah and shake hands  
with people from Combatants for Peace and Al-Haq  
and Al-Am'ari refugee camp.  
As if at the Friday demonstrations at the Wall,  
confrontations with helmeted soldiers, tear gas, sponge bullets,  
a child in a coma, another in a wheelchair,  
just one soldier shakes her head  
this isn't right, this isn't kosher  
and putting down her Tavor, says it aloud  
and the soldiers near her lower their guns to the ground  
while to the doubtful she says, *that we would do this to them  
that we would terrorize these people—  
sear ourselves into their consciousness—this  
isn't kosher; this, she says slowly, isn't  
kosher.* And one by one the soldiers  
put down their guns and begin to chant  
“Not kosher, not kosher,” and extend  
their arms to the demonstrators—mostly Palestinians  
and some concerned activists from everywhere—  
who answer “Not halal, not halal”  
and grasp their hands.  
“Not kosher, not halal,”  
chanting until all of the Holy Land rings out.  
As if Israelis and Palestinians walk arm in arm chanting.  
As if they sit and listen, sometimes  
yell, then listen harder to give a little,  
take a little to build stepping stones  
to the United Sons of Abraham,  
the cousins who fought all night  
family again by morning.

## A BODY MADE FOR SIN

by Alex Nderitu

All the death and chaos that ensued can be traced back to a single, 30-second phone call. Here's the gist, verbatim, from mobile phone records obtained by the police after the fact:

*Matunda: 'Hello...Uko wapi, mrembo?'*

*Adhiambo: 'Hi! I'm in the hostel but I'm about to leave.'*

*Matunda: 'Where are you going?'*

*Adhiambo: 'I'm spending the weekend at my parent's home.'*

*Matunda: 'You can go to your folks' place tomorrow. I'm inviting you to a house party tonight.'*

*Adhiambo: 'I dunno. I'm with a classmate and we're about to head for town before it gets dark.'*

*Matunda: 'Is she as hot as you?'*

*Adhiambo: 'Hotter!' (giggles)*

*Matunda: 'Hotter?'*

*Adhiambo: 'She has a body made for sin.'*

*Matunda: 'Well, then. Why don't you bring her along? The party starts around seven. I'll pick you up in town after you're through with whatever you'll be doing, sawa?'*

*Adhiambo: 'Issa deal!' (giggles)*

Tom Matunda, 51, was a flamboyant, hat-wearing city businessman. He didn't have a particular line of interest but he was always flash with cash. He was what we refer to as a 'tender-prenuer': a businessman who uses political connections to get government contracts. Adhiambo 'Adhis' Onyango was a 23-year-old Bachelor of Arts in Mass Media and Communication student at the Paramount University of Eastern Africa. Her classmate and BFF was 24-year-old Joanne 'Mso' Muthoni. Within one year after the three of them attended the party on Ngong Rd, two of them would be dead and the streets of Nairobi would resemble the Violent Ward of a mental hospital.

\*

My name is Keter Arap Tergat. Because of my Kalenjin ethnicity and 'Tergat' surname, people assume that I'm good at long-distance races. I'm not. Not all Kalenjins – or Kenyans for that matter – are good runners. It's like me watching WWE Wrestling and assuming that everyone in America is buff, or seeing a Tiwa Savage music video and thinking that all Nigerian women are as body perfect as she is. Professionally, I'm an Insurance Claims Investigator for Knight Mutual EA Ltd, the insurers of Paramount University of Eastern Africa, which is how I became involved in this grisly matter. The university and the firm I work for have something in common – they are pioneers in their fields. They were both established during the dark days of European colonial rule and were initially White-only establishments. Paramount is now the largest university in the region with dozens of colleges and an annual intake of over 30,000 students.

One bright Monday morning in July, the Dean of Students at Paramount called Joanne Muthoni's mother on her cellphone and asked her to come to his office at her earliest convenience. When she arrived, he informed her that Adhiambo had apparently been involved in road accident over the weekend and succumbed to her injuries. 'My deepest condolences,' he said to the now hysterical woman. 'I don't have any more details but the police suggested you go to the morgue in order to positively identify your daughter...But I can see that will have to wait.'

\*

It was a cruel death. Before dawn the previous Saturday, a traffic policeman had been notified of an accident scene along Ngong Road. On arrival, small produced a small loose-leaf notebook and began scribbling on it as he walked around the scene:

- *Lifeless body of a female adult on edge of rd.*
- *Broken skull, fractured limbs.*
- *Face covered in blood.*
- *Bloodied clothes, no shoes, no handbag.*

With no parked vehicles or witnesses in sight, the traffic cop decided to call the Criminal Investigations Department because 'they have forensics guys'. By now, a few onlookers had started to gather. Some looked away in shock or disgust. The young lady in a flowery dress with arms spread out like those of Jesus on the crucifix - and just as bloody - resembled something from a horror flick. As dawn was breaking, detectives arrived in a dark-blue Toyota Land Cruiser with police insignia. They took pictures, combed the surrounding area for clues, and carted the body away.

\*

Meanwhile, back at Paramount, the student body was getting agitated by the death of the 24-year-old. It was said that Adhiambo, who had been playing truant in order to avoid questions from the Dean of Students and the campus cops, had cryingly intimated that Muthoni had been assaulted at a party the night before she was found dead. Rumours that she had been murdered began to swirl around like leaves in a whirlwind. The same day the CID took over the case, a female motorist named Judith - a resident of Ngong suburbs - filed a report at Central Police Station stating that she had witnessed a bizarre incident the previous night, whereupon a black Subaru Forester had run over the sprawled body of a woman and proceeded without stopping. Though shocked, she had the presence of mind to memorize the license plate number of the Subaru before it melted into the night. Not sure what kind of drama was happening around her, Judith herself fled the scene. It took detectives three days to track down the black Subaru and arrest the driver, Gathairu - a moustached male in his early thirties. His car was impounded and was indeed found to have traces of Muthoni's blood on the underside. Gathairu claimed that while he recalled running over 'something' on the night in question, he had no idea it was a human being. He had assumed it was a dead dog or even a sack of produce that had fallen off a truck. Either way, he saw no reason to interrupt his journey. (But didn't his car have headlights? Was he inebriated? Did he realize what he had done but didn't want to be involved in a police case and possible manslaughter trial? But if he was conscious of what had happened, why didn't he wash his car before the fuzz caught up with



him?) Muthoni and Gathairu's statements converged on one point. The girl was most likely dead by the time the Subaru rolled over her. Gathairu was released pending further investigations. After the investigations yielded no hard evidence against him, detectives from the Criminal Investigations Directorate forwarded the case to the Director of Public Prosecutions. Suspecting that the incident was a lot deeper than a hit-and-run accident, the DPP ordered a public inquest into the death of the college student. The inquest was held at the Nairobi High Court. More than 30 witnesses, including cops, were lined up by the prosecution.

\*

The first witness to take a stand was Adhiambo 'Adhis' Onyango. She testified that on the material day had been invited to 'for an evening party' at Malkia Apartments, along Ngong Road. About 20 people were at the luxury apartment, she said, mostly around the heated swimming pool. Interestingly, most of the invitees were women. There were only seven men.

Prosecutor: 'Who invited you to this party?'

Adhiambo: 'A friend of mine called Tom Matunda.'

Prosecutor: 'Describe the party atmosphere, as you recall it.'

Adhiambo: 'At first everything was going smoothly. As in, people were just drinking and talking. I had arrived with Matunda but for most of the evening he was discussing an IT venture with some software guys. He's a businessman. I spent most of the time talking to a *mzungu* guest called Matthias Gregorios. He was great company. Apart from being an investor, he's also a poet so we spoke a lot about poetry. I remember him saying that the Chinese, Americans and Europeans conquered Africa by means of Trojan Horses, just like in the classic Greek narrative poems...At around 11 P.M., things turned nasty. Mso got into an altercation with two guys. She was shouting expletives and everything. I went over to calm her down and, shock on me, she starting calling *me* unmentionable names! She had never done that before! I realized she was completely drunk. She went back into the house and started breaking stuff. That's when someone called the guards and it was downhill from there.'

Prosecutor: 'Was Muthoni a drinker?'

Adhiambo: 'Always. But this time she was completely bonkers. She wouldn't listen to me. She was complaining that someone called her a hooker. She smashed bottles and flipped furniture. She even assaulted a guard who was trying to restrain her.'

Prosecutor: 'Would you describe the deceased as having been a violent person?'

Adhiambo: 'Noooo! Mso seemed happy just to be alive. She took on life as if it were a great adventure. Always laughing. And always cracking jokes. The first time I heard the campus joke that BA stands for "Bachelor of Anything" and BSc stands for "Bachelor of Stoning Cars", it was from her. We met as Freshers and just clicked. We were each other's ride-or-die. But she had a serious side. She hated liars. She liked *genuineness*. Honesty. To her, a known criminal was better than a closet saint.'

Prosecutor: 'And yet you didn't attend your best friend's funeral. Why?'

Adhiambo: 'I was afraid of being accused or attacked for luring Adhis to her death.'

Prosecutor: 'Why?'

Adhiambo: 'Because I'm the one who invited her to the event.'

Prosecutor: 'In other words, guilt?'

Adhiambo nodded, buried her face in her hands, and began to sob. The High Court judge called for a recess.

\*

Back at Paramount, the campus cops had made their own inquiries about the character of Muthoni. 'She was a life-ist,' said one male classmate. 'She loved to have *fun*. She was always laughing. She had a great laugh - loud and full and feminine! If I were to describe her in one word, I'd say "sexy". Very feminine and aware of her effect on men. Always wore dresses, never trousers. She had the smoothest legs you ever saw and cleavage you couldn't avoid staring at.' A female classmate, however, had more intimate knowledge: 'Mso was bulimic,' she said. 'She tried to lose weight but with no success. Most men wouldn't have believed her struggle was real because she was sexy as hell just the way she was. Her yearning for an inner-thigh gap was completely unnecessary.' The biggest difference between Adhiambo and Muthoni, it emerged, was their economic background. Unlike her best friend who was comfortably middle class, Muthoni came from the shanty-town of Kayole. She leveraged on her looks to acquire the creature comforts her mother, a City Council worker, could never afford. Her first campus boyfriend, a bespectacled Engineering student and devout Anglican, accused her of having 'too many male friends' and 'dressing like a prostitute.' This caused a violent row between them, after which they went separate ways.

\*

The second witness to take the stand at the inquest was a wealthy, light-skinned Meru woman who looked like an improper fraction because her bosom was so large and her legs so skinny. She had plenty of makeup, a winning smile, and cleavage as deep as the Rift Valley. 'I saw the young *ngirl* mixing *ndrinks*,' she said with a sneer. 'Tusker Malt and Rosé wine! She *ngot* so *ndrunk*, she nearly fell into the pool. *Ngoodness* me! You *shound* have seen her! But I left before the chaos I later heard about. Poor *ngirl*. So young.' A waitress at the party also testified that Muthoni was mixing drinks and became increasingly unruly. She also said that the party began to thin out at around midnight. The sound of car alarms being de-activated, doors slamming shut, and engines revving permeated the night. Matundra and 'his girls' didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave.

\*

As the inquest dragged on, the case became one of those 'human interest' stories that gain national attention. Muthoni's images were splashed all over newspapers and television screens. The most popular profile picture of her depicted a grinning, cherubic, plus-size, 'yellow-yellow' girl with apple-smooth skin, natural hair, and almost perfect teeth. Matundra declined all media interviews and even instructed his lawyer to try and prevent him from making personal appearance at the inquest. His relationship with Adhiambo also broke down, with each blaming the other for the mess they had gotten themselves into.

Matthias Gregorios, the Greek expatriate and poet, took the stand on the second day. He was a wiry, 60-something-year-old former shipping agent. He said that he met Adhiambo

for the first time that evening at the luxury flats but they immediately hit it off. He had begun by complimenting her double-row of waist-beads (She was wearing a 'tumbo-cut' top to show off her belly button and the strings of beads). The Greek poet asked about their significance to African women because it wasn't the first time he had spotted girls proudly wearing them. They then sat down on a sofa on the verandah, not far from the heated swimming pool, and talked about everything from politics to poetry.

Matthias testified that from his vantage point, he saw Muthoni go to the edge of the pool, remove her high heels and sit on the edge with her feet in the water. She was drinking wine at the time. Two male silhouettes approached her and at first they appeared to be enjoying each others' company. They then got into a heated argument. He distinctly heard her say, 'I'm not a hooker!' Adhiambo left his side to try and calm the situation. The men left the scene. Muthoni returned indoors, followed by Adhiambo. Muthoni left her wine, shoes and handbag by the pool.'

Prosecutor: 'At around what time did the pool incident take place, Mr. Gregorios?'

Matthias: 'Oh, around midnight? I wasn't really keeping track of time. There's no time limit to such parties. Guests come and go as they please.'

Prosecutor: 'And how would you describe Muthoni's state?'

Matthias: 'Oh, she was as drunk as a sailor. She nearly fell into the pool as she walked away from her friend in anger.'

Another witness, a 30-something old woman called Natasha, had an even clearer picture of the poolside events because she was sitting just a few feet away from Muthoni. You could tell she had spent time abroad from the way she rolled her 'r's. According to Natasha, 'the two chaps' had tried to lure Muthoni upstairs for a threesome in one of the 'private rooms' but she asked for money. Whereupon one of them asked her whether she was hooker. She took it as an insult and starting yelling that was not a hooker. The men were surprised by her mention of money because such parties often consisted of kinky but otherwise normal business and political types – swingers, closet homosexuals, BDSM enthusiasts and the like. The sex was never transactional. Some attendees just engaged in normal business networking activities. Embarrassed, the two men chose to disappear. But Muthoni's rant had attracted attention. Adhiambo – whom Natasha knew from similar events – approached Muthoni in a vain attempt to calm her down. 'Man, did she flip her lid!' Natasha said in an American accent. 'She stormed the house on naked feet and started smashing stuff and flipping furniture. Adhiambo called Matunda. They all went up to a private room. Matunda started unloading on the girl. It sounded like a domestic fight. Somebody called the guards and the caretaker. They all went upstairs. After about fifteen minutes, Muthoni came downstairs crying a river and ran towards to the gate. Adhiambo followed her. The two got into it again. Arguing. Muthoni kept dropping f-bomb. She wanted to leave. At first the guards tried to restrain her but Matunda ordered them to let her, and she dashed out of the gate all by herself. Nobody followed her. There was some laughter from the house. Matunda was furious.'

\*

CCTV footage from Malkia Apartments's security company was played in court after Natasha's testimony. Unfortunately, it didn't add much value to the proceedings because

it was limited to the public areas of the luxury apartment complex, like the entrance and stairwell. The black-and-white aerial footage of people going in and out, drunk or otherwise, gave little insight into what was happening in the private areas, such as the pool-side. The only talk-worthy scenes showed Muthoni indoors smashing a random wine glass against a wall hanging in a fit of anger; an outdoor scene of Muthoni running bare-foot towards the gate with Adhiambo in hot pursuit; Muthoni and Adhiambo arguing, and Muthoni exiting the premises on her own.

\*

The next day, main security guard on duty gave his version of the events. He spoke only in Kiswahili. He recalled 'mkubwa' (Matunda) rolling into the premises in a brand new Range Rover Sport. In the vehicle were two girls. More people arrived and left throughout the night. At around midnight, the guard had been informed of a scuffle in the main house. He alerted the Caretaker and along with another uniformed guard they went to investigate. They found 'mkubwa' in an upstairs room with the same two girls he had arrived with. One girl was on the floor, being kicked and slapped by 'the boss'.

Prosecutor: 'And what was the other girl doing at the time?'

Security Guard: *'Alikuwa anaambia mkubwa, "Wacha kumpiga! Wacha kumpiga!"'*

The Caretaker was a barrel-chested man in his forties. He must have weighed at about 300 pounds. He impressed me the most. I believed every word he spoke. He didn't seem afraid of anything. He had the confidence of a martial artist or body-builder. He was so huge, when he took the stand during the inquest, the cops, lawyers and litigants around him looked like moons orbiting a planet. He said that he was alerted to a disturbance in one of the apartments and went to investigate, accompanied by two security guards. Even as he climbed the steps to the room where the supposed troublemaker was being held, he could hear the echo of face slaps and a female voice shrieking, "Leave her alone!". When he got into the room, he was informed that the shoeless girl had become a nuisance and was damaging property. As they were trying to decide what to do with her, she bolted out of the room, followed by her friend. One guard initially tried to stop her but Matunda told him to let her go. The deep-chested Caretaker's own suggestion was they detain her in one of the rooms under her friend's care until she sobered up or morning came, but the 'boss' was tired of putting up with her.

They should have listened to the caretaker. Adhis ran towards Ngong Rd, her alcohol-addled brain probably convincing her that she would somehow get a lift home (despite being sans money and identification documents). She was so used to coasting on her good looks, she probably thought that anything was within her reach. But her chosen hitch-hiking spot was poorly chosen – it was on a bend. A motorist named Duncan Kibe, testified that he saw a clearly inebriated girl waving him down from the edge of the road. Because she was standing on a curve, he nearly mowed her down with his VW Passat. After swerving to avoid the drunkard, he glanced sideways to determine if she were a hitch-hiker, prostitute or even a carjacker. She was holding a Smartphone in one hand and looked well dressed but the drunken manner in which she stumbled about smelt of trouble and Kibe sped off. When he heard of the accident the next day, he automatically knew it was the drunk girl from the night before.

The first driver that hit Muthoni probably didn't see her until it was too late. The distance between the skid marks and the corpse suggested that the vehicle was either speeding or very large. It knocked her like a Spanish bull goring a matador. In a panic, the driver fled the scene, leaving Muthoni more squarely on the road. Two cars then arrived almost simultaneously, so this time there was a witness to the vehicular crime. A lady driver (Judith) watched in horror as the other car rode over Muthoni's body as if it were a bump, and then speed off. Judith noted the car model, the features of the driver (Gathairu) and – best of all – the license-plate number; all of which she later turned over to the police.

\*

After a break of about two weeks, in which the judge was busy with other cases before him, the inquest continued. The traffic cop who first arrived at the scene arrived at the High Court in his full blue police uniform, even though he had the day off. He said that, in his judgment, the first car that hit Muthoni did so so hard that it must have sent her flying. As fate would have it, she landed face-first on the tarmac, breaking her skull. 'She bled so much,' the copper said. 'That she looked as if she was wearing a red face mask. I wouldn't have recognized her if I knew her. To make matters worse, she had no identification on her. Strangely, she still had a gold chain with a love heart pendant. She didn't appear to be the victim of a sexual attack or violent robbery and my initial impression was that this was a vehicular incident. Kenya loses over 200 people a year to road carnage, almost half of them pedestrians. We later found her phone in the dewy grass about 20 feet from the cadaver. It probably flew into the air after the first speeding vehicle collided with her.'

Speaking in a monotone that nearly sent me to sleep, the chief Government Pathologist – a Dr. Titus Ngunjiri – indicated that Muthoni had sustained serious head injuries, and was probably dead by the time she was run over by at least one salon-sized vehicle. 'Ethanol levels from samples of her blood indicated very high levels of intoxication before her death,' he said, staring at the courtroom attendees through spectacles that looked as thick as bullet-proof glass. He said that the toxicology reports indicated that Muthoni had imbued enough alcohol to impair her judgment and cause double vision. In her state, there was no way she could have walked in a straight line or spoken without slurring her words. She would also have had a high tolerance for pain. (Hence the frustration of the people trying to make her 'snap out of it.' ('A teetotaler with that amount of alcohol in their system would have immediately passed out,' the doctor said.

\*

After another long break, the hearing resumed. The businessman at the centre of what had now become a national TV drama finally appeared at the public inquest. With his right hand raised, he swore tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. He had earlier recorded a statement with the police, in which he asserted his innocence. He spoke about Muthoni being 'drunk and uncontrollable'. He became enraged when she started to smash bottles and yell at those trying to calm her down. He admitted to slapping her in a vain attempt 'to bring her back to her senses'. At one point she 'broke away from the people trying to help her' and yelled at her best friend that she was going

home. A guard stopped her and she kicked him twice in the shins. I told the guard to let her go. After all, she's was an adult. As fate would have it, she became involved in a road accident that nobody could have foreseen. After some whispers into his ear from his lawyer, Matunda said: 'Regardless of the circumstances under which that beautiful lady lost her life, I would like to extend my deepest condolences to her mother and the rest of her family and friends. Fate can indeed be cruel, even to good people.'

\*

After listening to all the witnesses and weighing the available evidence, the judge ruled that Joanne Muthoni had not been murdered. She had instead 'wandered onto a busy public road in a drunken stupor and become the victim of at least two hit-and-run accidents.' Matunda breathed a sigh of relief. His lawyer told the media that his client had been 'exonerated' and would not be issuing any further statements. The ruling essentially terminated the case and absolved those adversely mentioned.

\*

Back at Paramount University, all hell broke loose. Within hours of the ruling there were hundreds of college students marching up and down the streets of Nairobi, baying for Matunda's blood and insisting that there had been a miscarriage of justice. Motorists and shop owners complained of being harassed by angry, placard-waving students. The messages on the placards included: 'R.I.P JOANNE MUTHONI', 'INJUSTICE ANYWHERE IS INJUSTICE EVERYWHERE', '#JusticeForMuthoni', 'COMRADE POWER!' Some students remained in the various campuses where they went on a rioting spree (which was how Knight Mutual became involved in the matter). The University Vice-Chancellor called in the dreaded General Service Unit of the National Police Service, but the baton-wielding, teargas-lobbying, anti-riot police only made things worse. It was like striking a beehive. As the kids fled the GSU, they stoned windows and cars and brought traffic to a standstill in the highway outside the main campus.

At around 9.00PM, as images of the protesting 'comrades' were flashed all over the nightly news, Matundara found himself surrounded by a gang of about ten machete-wielding youths as he drove out of a private club in Nairobi's posh Lavington area in his gleaming Range Rover Sports Edition. He tried to reverse but the marauders had thought of that in advance and tossed roadside rocks onto the road. He drive to advance, even if it meant mowing a few of the buggers down in self-defence. Once again the vehicle jolted as it bumped over rocks. Stones began to pelt the windows and windshield. The tender-prenuer gave a primal scream and began to wrestle with his seatbelt. It was at that point that he noticed that the liquid that had starting splashing all over his body and car interior was not rain but paraffin. And then came the inevitable 'whoosh' as someone tossed a flame through a smashed window.

I wonder if Matunda recognized the shape of Adhiambo's body as he pleaded with the attackers through the rising flames. It was a body that he knew intimately.

## **FAITH AND INTENTIONS**

**BY MIKE CALLAGHAN**

give a rat  
a tiny electric car  
its going to drive it  
mouth open  
permanently unblinking  
to pick up froot loops  
forgetting the problem  
or believing it solved  
feed your friends  
emotions and opinions  
choices and contradictions  
magic and philosophy  
beautiful experiments  
briefly gorgeous.

## **FOREST CITIZEN MASS EXODUS PLAN**

**BY LILIANA LILIANA**

This is the second day I see her without appetite for food and fun adventure. We usually venture to the neighbouring village in search of fruits or just spying over human beings. Human beings are unique in that they like to make their lives more complicated than they should be. A few days ago I heard they were talking about the experience of eating in a new restaurant in the city nearby. "I was so excited grilling the meats that I burned my sleeve," one of them said. I am not sure why human being would want to go to a restaurant wearing a nice outfit to cook for themselves. We, proboscis monkeys, would never do that. First, because we don't have monkey restaurants. And second because we are happy with fruits on the trees or sometimes at human beings' kitchens. But human beings are also kind. Those people in the neighbouring village always help out each other. A family were celebrating a wedding last month and the entire village helped to decorate the house and cook massive amounts of food so they could party together.

Oh by the way, I am Anna. Sorry I talk too much before even introducing myself. I live in this forest – if my brain does not lie, this forest is on the third largest island in the world. I live happily with other monkeys and animals, loads of them. But no, don't ever picture a penguin or a panda. I am not sure they will like it here.

Tania is my best friend. A very energetic one for our species. But she's looked sad for the past 2 days. Not sure what got into her.

\*\*\*

"How's school, Grace?" asked Diana, Grace's mother, while cooking her favourite food, cassava leaf stew. Grace is studying at a famous university on an island where the capital city of the country is. I think she studies construction and comes home only during semester breaks.

"School is fine, mama. My grades are great and I am ready for the holidays," Grace responded while tying up her hair into a ponytail. "Oh, my internship was also great. I learned a lot about factory construction. And, you should be happy that I will graduate next semester. Now let's plan my holiday." Grace added, landing on a grey sofa bed that has been in the house for a long time.

I always like it whenever Grace is here for the holidays as she likes hanging around in the forest. She would start in the morning with her black backpack and blue trainers. When the sun is on the top of her head, she would find a big tree and set up her picnic gear under the massive leaves, then have lunch there. My favourite part is that she would share her food with us. She would pretend she could talk to us. The thing is we understand her, but she could not understand us. Sometimes, it is funny to see her talking to us – we respond to it, but she would give an absolutely irrelevant response to us.

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Tania and I were racing to get to our favourite fruit tree when we saw Grace walking in the forest with her usual gear. I suggested to Tania that we visit Grace after we are done with our race. Usually she would immediately say yes. But today, within a split second she said, "No, you can go. I don't want to.

"Why?"

"I don't like her anymore."

"Why?"

"Because she is not the same."

"Why?"

"Why can't you stop asking?"

Confused, I decided not to ask again and instead to focus on the race as I was hungry. After winning the race, I went to visit her under the big tree that human beings named *Eusideroxylon zwageri*. Grace was half laying down with her back kissing the lower part of the tree while reading a book. When I came close to her, she closed the book. She looked at me, then took out an apple and handed it to me. I took it with a smile and ate it while watching her. She looked at me and said, "I really like this forest and I believe you are happy living here. I don't have it in the city where I am studying. All they had was a concrete forest with air conditioning."

"What do concrete forests look like?" I asked as I have no idea how to grow concrete.



“In that city, there were many kinds of people. Some people work in the concrete forest, some people work in slums.”

*I told you we had weird conversation.*

“I did not ask that, Grace.”

“I know, right? I once made a trip to the slums in the morning and then went to the concrete forest afterward to get some coffee in the afternoon. Seeing the difference was so overwhelming that I wanted to cry. You are lucky, every animal in this forest seems to have equally lovely places to live.”

As she finished her sentence, a tear left her eyes. I think she should come back home more often to keep her happy. I then went up to the branches on the tree that she was leaning on to spend the rest of the afternoon with her.

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“Tania, do you still not want to tell me why you now dislike Grace? It’s been one semester and Grace has even finished her studies,” I asked Tania when we were sitting on a *Limpato Vernacular* tree enjoying the sunbeams on a lovely Sunday. “You might not understand even if I tell you because you like her so much,” Tania said without moving her sight from two butterflies who were fighting over a flower.

“Okay, want to give it a shot? See if I could understand it.”

“Last time she came home, I heard her talking on the phone. It seemed she was offered work after she finished her studies by the company where she an internship.”

“Nothing unusual about being offered a job. We should be happy for our friend.”

“But the company wanted to build a factory in this area. In this forest!”

I was frozen for a second and then asked “She rejected it, no?”

“She said she would be happy to join the company and would support the factory building here since she knows the area.”

I do not want to believe Tania’s words but she never told a lie. She is the most terrible liar on earth, even a fish would know if she was lying. We spent the rest of the day in silence as I needed time to process this information.

The next day I decided to pay Grace a visit at her place. She was sitting with her parents on the terrace with three cups of coffee on the wooden table.

“I think it’s a good chance for me, mama, for us. I know that you both spent most of our fortune for my studies. They offered me a very good salary so I can even pay you back all you spent for my studies. They also offered a job for papa. We can be the richest family in this village. And as a plus point, it will result in job creation as they will need people to work in the factory,” Grace said in one breath. She doesn’t look like the Grace I know, or perhaps I never knew her after all.

“People in this village don’t need job creation, Grace. They are not jobless. They just have low income jobs due to the unequal pay arrangement from our economy system,” Diana said after sipping her coffee.

“Well, yes, and the factory will give them better incomes, mama. The company will pay them well. Our village can turn into the city we usually visit 3 hours from here, or even better,” said Grace, trying to convince her mama.

“I think I am too old to work in a new place, Grace. And I like working for the clinic down the road. I can’t picture myself sitting in a clinic inside a big building with only 3 or 4 patients a day, who I assume would be just the factory workers.” Jono, her father, finally spoke while looking at me.

“And what will happen to your monkey friends and their forest gang?” He continued, winking at me.

Grace was silent for a while and said, “I am sure they can manage. There are still forests in neighbouring regencies, papa. They would be able to migrate.”

“Okay, you have three hours to think how you’ll help them to migrate to the neighbouring forests safely. You can present the plan to me and mama after dinner. I will cook turmeric soup fish for dinner. Oh, by the way, when I say ‘them’, it means every animal in the forest,” said Jono, heading to the kitchen.

Grace stayed sitting there trying to work out her masterplan for the mass migration of forest citizens.

This is the first time I feel upset for the whole of my life. I can’t even cry imagining what sort of trip me and the forest gang will need to do. My brain starts working on calculating the total days we need to walk as we can’t get on the bus like human beings. What about our favourite foods and shelters? Will the citizens of the other forest welcome this massive migration? Will there be enough food for everyone? Maybe we all should travel light so it will not take too long to walk. When do we start preparing our departure? My brain has never thought about these things so it doesn’t quite know what to tell me. I think I will stay to spy on their after dinner conversation. I know eavesdropping is not good, but this is an emergency. Oh wait, I’ll ask Tania to join me. So we can figure out together how to pass this information to the forest gang.

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Grace and her family are having a nice dinner. Lots of laughing, and food on the table. Most of the dinner conversation was about nostalgic events. Grace loves her father’s cooking so much that she would not stop eating.

After dinner, everyone contributes to cleaning the dining table. Grace volunteers to wash the dishes, and joins her parents in the living room afterwards.

“So, Miss Grace. You have passed the three hour planning period for your mass migration project. The floor is yours,” said Jono, imitating a news anchor style.

Grace takes a deep breath, then says, “Dear Mr Jono and Ms Diana, I have spent 3 precious hours developing a mass exodus plan for the citizens of the forest. I have calculated the number and kinds of animals as well as their needs for food. The result is I am unable to find a safe plan. I also understand that the factory is not what our village needs. I do not want to turn our lovely village into a concrete forest. Hence, I have decided to abort the mission. Following this, I will let the company know that I am not joining them and will suggest to them to not open a factory here. And if they do not listen to my suggestion, I will influence our local government and use my media contacts to make them cancel the plan. That’s all my presentation. Thanks very much.” Grace finishes with the bright smile I always remember.

“That’s my girl,” said Diana while giving Grace a warm hug. “Jono, your spell on the fish dish worked really well.”

Tania and I are relieved. We will sleep well tonight.

## **BLOOM**

**BY JESSICA BURDG**

*Are they sad?* My daughter asks, watching the wispy dandelion tufts float away. Moments before, her sister had plucked the flower from the earth with her child-hands, squeezed her child-eyes tightly shut, and, with hope on her child-breath, had scattered the wishes into the wind. *Are they sad because they’re gone now?* I don’t think so, I lie to her. I do not tell her how I feel about the flower. That I respect its final act, though it didn’t choose it: to give, to offer new growth to the world even as its own capacity for growth is ripped away at a mere breath, or a loss of one. When she’s older, I will tell her the truth: that those flowers some people mow over? They are not weeds. They are the carriers of *seeds*. Seeds of change, change that arcs upward, change on which we rest the wishes of our children. I do not tell her that one day, she will use her no-longer-a-child hands to affect that change. Will bend the gaze of her no-longer-a-child eyes to watch those seeds rise. Will one day use her no-longer-a-child breath to utter words like justice and equality and peace. *Well, I’m sad they’re gone.* I tell her that I am, too. But to remember that the seeds will make their way into the crumbly earth, they will soak in the moisture from the soil, and they will rise alongside the other plants and the trees, into the sun. Where they can breathe.

## **FREEDOM IS...**

**BY MICHAEL SMITH**

a loaded term. It’s the thug to those,  
who dare drag their feet  
to the rhythm of the whip,  
who think through a circlotron.

Freedom is a renovation project  
of the Bastille (or perhaps the image of it).  
They held up the flag like an idol  
(but unlike the sun, we were told to look at it).

Freedom is a pot to piss in,  
but the choice to piss outside instead.  
It is finding beauty in the streets  
when the street is embargoed.

Freedom is a single syllable broke in two:  
a lewd tongue whose dancing  
makes the earth yield to its motion,  
shaking with lustful delight.

Freedom is a dog chasing an alley cat  
When neither know what an alley is,  
a motorcycle that clunks – so both  
of you can go your own ways.

Freedom is the universe:  
Versus uni: the many “saddled with”  
the one. The hanged ancestor  
you now sling jokes towards.

Freedom is a flat face --  
Un Mártir stretched on a poster,  
without all the dimensions,  
but not hiding any more.

Freedom is being able to say  
You're not free.

**KAVIDU**  
**BY NANCY NDEKE**

She was only thirteen, and in last grade in primary school, when, on the first day of the second month of the year, the head teacher shocked the entire school by announcing that learning was coming to an end and that all children were to forthwith, get back to their homes till further notice.

A loud murmur rose from the children, some with glee, other's like Kavidu, with utter disbelief; even horror.

Kavidu loved school and her greatest ambition was to score high marks and land a scholarship to a prestigious high school, from where she was guaranteed of a smooth entry to University. Her ultimate dream was to do law and become a Judge.

As celebration broke out among the lower classes and a few from the higher classes. Kavidu's eyes stung with bitter tears. In her agony, she missed the details of why school was closing at this time. When her attention crawled back to the droning Head teacher, she caught some of the words that recently had been filtering in from the neighbors transistor radio. Something about a viral disease that was killing people in far away lands. China. United States. Italy. Spain, the head teacher went on to explain that since there was no known cure for this terrible disease that he called COVID 19, the government had seen it wise to close schools to mitigate against contracting the disease.

Kavidu tried to remember some of the things she had heard from the neighbors radio. But her concentration was astray.

“O my God,” the girl cried inwardly as she made the sign of the cross to ward off this reality that was all so real. But there was no time for more prayers or further weeping. The assembly was dismissed and the children’s voices once more rent the air with celebration.

On wooden legs and a heavy heart, Kavidu trudged home with an elephantine burden on her small frame.

One hour later, she was at her home. Home being a one roomed cardboard walled affair that housed her, her elder sister with her four year old son, her mother who was partially blind and her mother’s last born child who was also four years old.

“What brings you back so early Kavidu? “ the mother asked.

She was a charcoal seller and her elder daughters baby sitter, besides her own. Her work station was just outside their house, in the corner of the largest slum in the country.

Kavidu sighed before answering her mother. “School is closed ma. Teacher said it’s safer for ...”

“In February? What school closes in February? Or you have gone the way of your sister?” the mother disrupted Kavidu’s answer.

She knew what the mother was alluding to. Her sister had got pregnant while she was in the same class as Kavidu. No one knew for sure who the father of the expected child was since the boy friend she had alluded to as responsible, had bolted once the child was born. The child was clearly of another race all together. Fair hair, fair skin and a nose like no other in the family or neighborhood rested the paternity issue. And little Joe was growing joyfully in the bliss of ignorance under the care of the grandma. The sister was long gone into a night job that occasionally led her to arrests and assaults by unknown co-workers or clients as she called them.

“No ma, the head teacher said it’s because of COVID 19,” Kavidu answered.

“ COVID what? Is that the thing from China the radio keeps harping about?”

“Yes ma. But teacher said it’s all over and children should stay home not to contract it.”

“So home is now quarantine eeh? This government oohh!” the mother exclaimed.

Next door neighbor came out to hear the reason of noisy school kids on a Monday morning during a school session.

“So it’s true about this China thing eeh?” she asked Kavidu’s mother as she adjusted her washed out Dela around her thin frame. A man brushed past her pulling his trousers up into place. The man waved at Kavidu’s mother as he took the small path between rolls of

houses to the main path leading to a dirt road that connected to the tarmac road. Instead of answering, Kavidu's mother, with a sly smile asked the neighbor.

"Isn't that the one who knocked your teeth off or my eyes now are completely gone?"

"A woman must eat my friend. Beggar's have no luxury of choices," the neighbor answered somberly.

Kavidu, meanwhile was having a tussle with her elder sister who slept during the day and hated to be woken up for whatever reason.

"You!" the sister had hissed when Kavidu pulled the rough half torn carton where she stored her earthly belongings from under the only bed in the house.

"What's wrong with you? And why are you here in the first place?" she asked angrily as fully awake now, she pulled a lone cigarette from under the heap of clothes that acted as a pillow and proceeded to light it with violent flickers of an unwilling lighter.

At the fourth try, the lighter caught and she greedy pulled at the foul smelling smoke amid half closed blood shot eyes.

"Sorry Wendo," Kavidu pleaded.

"As if sorry is a sleeping pill."

"I didn't mean to wake you up. Am sorry."

Wendo stared malevolently at her younger sister before a spit of cough engulfed her leading to her sitting up and holding her chest with one hand while the other firmly secured the smoldering cigarette.

Seeing this, Kavidu quickly poured some water from a jerrican positioned behind the door and handed it to her sister. Wendo gulped the water amid further coughing but at least the attacks on her sister ended. She crushed the glowing cigarette moodily, tucked it back into the rough packet and turned over to sleep.

Kavidu carefully pulled out her dilapidated carton box, proceeded to pull out an old floral dress which she then put on. She checked out her school uniform for visible dirt, she must have concluded that it was still clean enough for storage. She folded it lovingly and put it back in the carton.

She then withdrew to the mat which was her study place and proceeded to make a time table for her study during the forced holiday.

From outside, her mother and neighbor were still talking about the man who had knocked the neighbors two front teeth over a scuffle involving missing cash.

"He knocked my teeth out, did he get his money back?" The neighbor justified her picking the man's pockets while underplaying the consequences.

"You are a brave one. He could have killed you, you know," Kavidu's mother added.

"Kill who? My long knife would have done a fast job on his neck, but after I spat out my teeth, I knew I had won should there be a court case and even in the court of public opinion," the woman neighbor was laughing as she explained her success story.

Kavidu winced from an inner embarrassment. She hated life at this place. A place where privacy was unknown. A place where love was alien. A place where anything and everything was for sale.

Kavidu's motivation in school was to excel and get out of this place. Go to a far away place that will never remind her of the raw sewer running along every path. A place

away from the criminal enterprise that was the way of life here. Away from attacks from drunken men right outside the door step after seven. Away from police brutality that visited the slum dwellers whenever they came chasing after escaped criminals. This particular scenario was the worst. If you directed the police to where the criminal was in hiding, you became a prey to other criminals. If you didn't, the police beat you up, worse than the beating, was the gang rape. Kavidu closed her eyes as waves of agonized pain washed over her body. She knew she would never forget December 24th and the attack on herself by two beefy officers in uniform. That the same was happening to her mother with the little kids squeezed to the wall was a memory that was beyond tears. It simply numbed her body leaving a trickle of blood on her lower lip where she had dug in her teeth.

The sister coughed again and groaned. Kavidu came back to the present and forced her mind to concentrate on the task of making a time table.

Hers was a long term dream of leaving the slums. And the only route to her mind was the educational path. Of course her family had to move out of this hell with her. She dubbed her lower lip. Her eyes stung. She blinked rapidly to forestall tears. Her sister coughed again and this time she sat up in bed with her red eyes watering and enlarged. She didn't look well, but Kavidu knew not to ask or comment. Wendo was a very unpredictable person. Besides flinging insults of the most foul type at anybody for little, she was quick with her hands and easily dispensed kicks and blows. Even once, she hit the mother.

That she paid rent for the family and school fees for Kavidu, her excesses were tolerated and forgiven even if grudgingly.

"Get me some more water," Wendo demanded with a hoarse voice.

Kavidu did so quickly, but the water didn't seem to help. So delving into her bra, Wendo fished out a fifty shillings note and handed it to Kavidu.

"Get me some gin from mama pima's."

Kavidu flew out of the room on chariots wheels. And ten minutes later, she was back with a liter of gin in a plastic bottle which was tucked under her arm pits to escape notice by prowling police in plain clothes who drunk more than the slum dwellers and took any and many opportunities to rob others of this drink.

Wendo downed almost a half of the bottle before she stopped amidst severe grimaces and more coughing. Once she had cleared the bottle, she turned back to bed and slept.

Kavidu could do her school work in peace finally. But what peace?

About half an hour after the sister had fallen asleep and her violent snores made the cardboard walls vibrate, a noise came calling from outside. Running feet, whistle blowing and dogs barking. The mother quickly pushed the children onto the house, following them, as she dragged in the half sack of Charcoal inside.

Kavidu was up and about dragging the half full sack to help the mother, when suddenly, her mother's head exploded right in front of her eyes with a warm shower of blood and greyish matter splashing on her face and chest before she keeled over and landed over Kavidu, pushing her backwards to fall on the two four year old boys who stood at the center of the room.

Kavidu could feel the mothers spirit struggling to leave the body with shuddering jerks. She held onto the shaking torso till it was silent. Then, she slowly and gently pushed the inert body to the side and stood up.

A day can be twelve lifetimes and still have more space for more, for Kavidu was to experience one more horror before the ten minutes were done. Joe, her four year old nephew lay with his eyes staring up the smoky roof of the hovel, his chest blown off completely. Overwhelmed, Kavidu threw up copiously till she went down on her knees.

The pandemonium outside had died down as it usually did when cops and robbers played their games. Excited voices came filtering in from a distance and reached Kavidu's ringing ears. When the neighbor with missing teeth came to check on them, her scream brought the entire line of hovels at Kavidu's house. She could hear the agonized voices and the bitterness in them. Some wept as they watched two bodies lying on a bloody mat. Wendo slept through the shooting, only to be woken up by the shrill voices of the neighbors. She rolled over the side of the bed only for her red shot eyes to be confronted by a scene from hell. She sat up straight and in an effort to come out of bed, she fell over. It took Kavidu's intervention for her not to fall over the bodies.

Kavidu felt the intensity of heat emanating from her sisters body and another alarm went off her head. Was Muendo sick or it was the usual hangover, she wandered as she helped her stand still.

Wendo tried to scream but nothing came out of her throat. Instead, a stream of greenish liquid jet hit the floor from somewhere deep inside her before she passed out. Now, the smell of cooling blood, the heat inside the room and the fresh diarrhea soaked up the place and rose like a cloud to mingle with sewer water outside, creating a most revolting stench that sent the mourners and sight seers out the door.

Kavidu was further paralyzed by the events unfolding. While, she struggled to push the now weak moaning sister, she saw from the corner of one eye, her little brother holding the hand of their dead mother with one of his own, and pulling out money from the mothers bra with the other. The shock of seeing a four year old doing what he was doing left Kavidu shivering with a seismic shudders, not Different from those of a dying person. "My God! What has this place done to the souls of children," she asked herself as she wrapped her sister with an old mattress cover after pulling down her soiled inner wear. To Kavidu's touch, the sister was burning up and was beginning to speak gibberish.

But the kid brother was not through with his strange behavior. Hesitantly, turned to Joe and went ahead to put his now bloodied hands inside the shirt the boy had been wearing. From under the armpits of his left hand, the boy pulled a small cloth pouch, which together with the money he had retrieved from the mothers body he handed to Kavidu. Bewildered and amazed, Kavidu picked the money and pushed it inside her own bra. She knew the child had been taught how and where to hide money. Even in a crisis like they were in, the slum dwellers would steal anything and everything of value and feel no guilt. Survival was the major preoccupation among the people. Whoever got short changed in the process was considered of no consequence.



“Now what?” Kavidu asked nobody. Her head was beginning to ache. Bile was still threatening to spill out but she knew she needed to be strong especially for her kid brother.

But boots clutched violently on the rough dusty paths outside told her who the next guests were.

Police had come to clean the evidence and take away the relics of the mornings show biz between law enforcement and law deserter’s.

They came in led by the chief of the area. The sight of the four armed officers shook Kavidu to the core. The event of the twenty fourth of December came back all over again, and this time, bile won and she threw up dry heaves for her stomach had nothing but shock, bitterness and solid anger.

She could not answer a single question the lead policeman asked and even if she had wanted, Her mouth had run dry.

The body of the mother and that of her niece were pulled out wrapped up with the only two blankets in the house and ferried to a waiting police landcruiser.

A second look at the sister who was shivering uncontrollably on the blanket- less bed, led the chief to suggest that the police drop her at hospital. But not before a nasty comment from one of the officers.

“Si huyu ni yule wa masoko ya majuu? Ama amepatikana na mdudu wa pili?” (isn’t this one of those upmarket business body part dealers? Or she caught a second worm?)

Kavidu did not miss the vulgarity and meanness of the statement. Her animus towards the officer was only contained by the shocking terror of the events of this morning. She pressed her lips together and held her kid brother tightly

The sister was carried in her seminude state with the neighbor with missing teeth helping.

Kavidu stood in the middle of the small bloodied room, her world spinning but still managing to hold onto sanity, if not for herself, at least for her brother.

What to do now? She wondered In her fevered mind. Could she go searching for her father, who threw them out of his home accusing the mother of infidelity even as he himself was living with another woman with whom he had two kids? She recalled the night they were thrown out with the mothers face bleeding profusely from punches and kicks. That’s how the mother had almost lost her eye sight, Kavidu shook at the memory.

That particular injustice is what give her the dream and drive to excel in school. She hoped one day to sit in a family court dispensing justice to all abused women and children. That the father got away with wife battery and refused to pay school fees for his kids was one more log in her blazing inferno to get into the legal profession.

“Kavidu,” the brother called bringing her mind back to the present.

“Why?” the boy asked.

Kavidu did not know what to say. Nothing made sense. The morning forced break, the sister with her hangover led cough and nastiness, blood flooded house, mum gone with little nephew...what answer could she give to her only relation?

She just hugged the boy tightly fighting a rising nausea.

“When is ma coming back Kavidu? Will they sew her head? It is not painful, is it? I hate injections,” the child muffled from where his head was buried in Kavidu’s slender waist. Her body shook.

“And Joe, he is coming back, right? Wendo doesn’t like us going out. She gets angry and then pinches us.”

Kavidu burst out in a shrill bell like sound that pierced the cold hearts of neighbors who were already back to their businesses.

In the slums, emotions were too expensive to spend on anything for long. Every minute was required to be used in search of the slim chances of food, leisure or evading arrest.

The women who were already out arguing over a lost broken bucket stopped to listen to the deranged wailing of the child, who had just graduated into a household leader.

The little boy joined the sister in the mourning and their duet seemed to touch a few people outside. As they came over to Kavidu’s house, the girl realized the danger of letting herself go. These pretenders would steal anything and everything they could lay their hands on without as much as sense of remorse for the family loss.

So before any got their heads through the door, Kavidu stopped the wailing, disengaged from the little brother and pushed the door shut.

And she knew then, for her, mourning was over and that any feelings of helplessness was a luxury she could not afford.

She put the brother on the stinky bed and proceeded to sweep the room to cover the blood that was already clotted. Every swipe of the broom brought nausea building up, but she kept on. One point was so bad that she poured the half sack of Charcoal on it. At least, she no longer could see the remains of her mother and nephew.

Then she changed her brother’s clothes and her own. She knew the risk of staying alone in this house with the brother overnight. She would be preyed on. And without the protection of her half blind mother and the nasty sister who could fight off anyone or pay someone else to do her fight, Kavidu knew, she would be toast tonight if she stayed. And if she left, the house would be emptied overnight. She sighed heavily as she grappled with a final decision.

A phone rung somewhere from under the clothes which the sister had been lying on as a pillow.

Kavidu picked it up and checking the caller, she saw it was Baby Star.

Kavidu knew who Baby Star was. A colleague of her sister but more nastier and worse tempered when drunk which was always.

“Hello,” Kavidu answered the mobile phone.

“Is it true what am hearing?” Baby Star cloaked. Her voice was as fearsome as her drunken vulgarity.

“Yes.”

“So what are you still doing there, you idiot? You are waiting for them to come and give it to you again? Get out!”

Kavidu quavered unable to ask where she would head to should she leave. But she was spared an answer with the following bark.

“Get your little self and brother now. You know Mukuru kwa Njenga? Walk there. Ask for mama Bui's shop from the stage. She will direct you to my house. And bring Wendo's work bag.”

“Yes,” Kavidu meekly answered.

And just like that, she had somewhere to go. With somewhere to go, she could think better, so she took her sister's work bag and her mother's old bag where she stored every piece of paper relating to anything that was ever written for her family. She also picked her school uniform and books and within an hour, she and her brother walked out of their home unsure whether they would ever come back again.

Mukuru kwa Njenga was quite some way off and it took Kavidu and her kid brother a good two hours and two more phone calls from Baby Star to get to the bus stage and Mama Bui's shop. She had bought her kid brother a roasted cob of maize on the way so he wasn't too hungry but he was tired.

Baby Star lived better than the Kavidu's though her home was also in a slum. She had two rooms, a sofa set and a television set. The house was made of timber and had a concrete floor.

Tired but slightly relieved for knowing she and her brother had a safe place to sleep for the night, she almost dozed off after sitting. The sofa was very comfortable, a comfort she barely remembered from when she lived in a real home with a father and a mother. But the moment passed and more news came in.

Her sister had been put in quarantine.

“What is that?” Kavidu asked Baby Star.

“You are the one in school,” Baby Star retorted but explained.

“She is in hospital. But you can't visit. They say it could be this thing that came from bats in China.”

“COVID 19?” Kavidu asked, remembering the Head teacher's explanation of why the school had to close.

“So why were you pretending not to know?” Baby Star asked.

“I wasn't. I just remembered what Teacher said this morning before closing school.”

Baby Star pointed Kavidu to the table behind the door where a prima stove and several sauce pans sat.

“Get something for yourself to eat. Your brother too.”

Kavidu obeyed. She had never used a prima stove before and she was afraid to ask, so she served herself and her brother, some cold rice and vegetables, then came back to the sofa. They ate slowly and once they had finished, the little boy fell asleep right there. He was tired.

Baby Star then explained the need for cleanliness in her house, before asking for Wendo's bag. Kavidu had got a thousand shilling note from the bag and hid it in her bra before they left the house. She had also found six hundred shillings from her mother's bag which she also hid in the same place.

After rummaging through the bag and finding no money, Baby Star started on Kavidu.

“No night prowler walks without money. ...where is the thousand that I expected to find here?” she asked with venom in her voice.

“I didn’t check for anything,” Kavidu pleaded.

“So you didn’t eeh? So where is it? To imagine I welcomed a thief in my house!” she said scornfully.

The cold in baby Star’s voice was ominous.

“If you are going to stay here, and I mean if you are, stealing can only be done by thieves. Proper thieves. And dear girl, you are most unqualified.”

A chill went down Kavidu’s back, giving her goose pimples. But she didn’t answer. She knew trouble was on the way. Heaven had just showed it’s first crawl.

Baby Star stood with Wendo’s bag and took it to the next room. Quickly, Kavidu removed the money she had stashed in her bra and hid it in her sleeping brother’s front trouser pocket. As if she had a vision of where Baby Star was headed from the room, immediately she came back she ordered Kavidu to stand. Kavidu did.

“Remove every thread on your body. You think you are very smart eeh?”

Shakily Kavidu removed all items of clothing leaving only her underwear and bra.

“Everything!” Baby Star ordered.

With eyes filled with unshed tears, Kavidu removed everything. But no money was found on her. She wished that was the end of the humiliation. No! Not by a long short, for Baby Star did a terribly insulting inspection, putting her fingers in her private parts in search of money she felt was now hers.

That’s when Kavidu knew for sure hell was real. The cold fingers stained brown with tobacco and chipped nail vanish was bleeding her heart. At that moment, she wished she had been shot dead with her mother.

“Well, looks like the little vixen may be telling the truth after all” Baby Star said as she watched the naked child quivering with embarrassment.

That night, Baby Star left the house at eight for work. She locked Kavidu and her brother inside explaining that she did so for lack of trust. Since the toilet was outside, Kavidu and her brother were to use plastic bags to relieve themselves should the need arise. For dinner, they ate bread and tea which was ok.

But with the television droning on and the baby brother asleep, Kavidu was deep in thought. After watching the police and robbers drama that took her mother’s life and that of her nephew, and to listen to untruths from the police spokesperson alluding to the fact that the woman and child who were shot dead were harboring the escaping robbers hence the police fire. The whole news was a lie. A fabrication.

“My God,” Kavidu cried. In the same news, they showed three young men shot and dead just a few meters from where Kavidu and her family lived. On closer look, Kavidu realized she knew one of the boys. A classmate at her school.

“My God!” Kavidu exclaimed again.

And she lost appetite for Television. She switched it off as well as the lights, flooding the house into total darkness.

That’s when, she let off the events of the day filter out in torrents of painful sobs that felt like death was taking over.

Spent, but still unwilling to accept Baby Star as their option for safety, she began thinking about other options she and her brother had.

To live with Baby Star was going to be a challenge. Many cases of fire outbreaks that killed children locked in rooms by parents were common occurrences back where they had come from. Sometimes, it was arson by malicious neighbors with unresolved issues with another. No way was she and her brother going to be subjected to disaster in waiting. She engaged her mind even as her head started throbbing hard. But she was arriving at a decision that almost shocked her when it fully formed. She slept but fitfully.

The opportunity to implement her hurriedly made plans came with Baby Star's arrival the following morning. She came home with a male visitor who grubbed Kavidu's backside as Baby star was making some eggs for the two.

Kavidu asked if she could go take a shower outside as well as bathe the brother, and to her relieve, she was told to stay out till the visitor left.

And that's the opportunity she took to run away with her kid brother. This time they run with nothing except the money they had saved from the mother's charcoal business and what was in the two bags.

Afraid of Baby Star coming out and finding the two missing, Kavidu hired a motorcycle to take them to the Catholic Church, not very far from their old slum. That she had thought of the church at all was a shock. They hadn't attended any church since their father threw them out. The mother was particularly bitter with church because the pastor of the Fire on the Mountain Church, they used to attend refused to harbor them the night in question. The pastor explaining that the church could not take sides in a marital conflict.

But it's at the church ground, Saint Paul's church specically, that finally these two souls found some semblance of normalcy. That morning, the government had announced a Country wide curfew as a measure to curb the spread of COVID 19.

The priest in charge welcomed the children from the gate, as a response to an alert from the gatekeeper, he first led his two young guests first, for a thorough wash of their hands and feet at an outside spot in the garden.

He then took the children to a wide veranda where he ordered the cook to get something for them to eat.

Meanwhile, he engaged the two by asking them easy questions about names, where they came from and what help they expected from him.

He listened to the harrowing tale as Kavidu very clearly but haltingly told the priest about the events of their life in the last thirty or so hours.

The priest remained calm, only nodding to encourage Kavidu to empty her over burdened heart. And the girl did, words running over each other, occasionally breaking down midsentence and choking over details. But father Peter did not interrupt. The boy kept on nodding off. He was clearly tired. God forbid that the child is sick, the priest thought. Kavidu had drained the entire story, only leaving the details of money and the body search details.

Kavidu felt quite relieved after the marathon recital, and ate the offered food with a modicum of enjoyment.

The priest was touched by the story Kavidu give. He knew much about human psychology to know truth when he heard it. What was told, as horrible as it sounded, worse was

left out. He needed time to think and to consult. The previous nights prime time news coverage of the shooting in the area the girl said she came from, led Credence to her story. Still, there was need to dig up more. The best intentions can easily fall on hard times for lack of consultations.

The priest led his two guests to a double bed room where they were provided with clean clothes, to change into after a shower. That there was a television in the room, with an inside bathroom and toilet was a miracle as far as Kavidu and her brother were concerned.

Fed and clean, they sat each on their bed to watch whatever was airing. Sleep stole them and in less than an hour, the two fell asleep.

When Kavidu woke up, it was four in the afternoon.

She took a minute to familiarize herself with the beautiful, pristine place she was in. The Television was still on and her brother was sleeping peacefully on his bed. She could not help a smile which was interrupted by a knock.

At the priests dinning room, there were four more people. A matronly nun, two more priests, and her father. Energy drained from her and her head spun. Except, that father Peter was fast in catching her she would have collapsed there and then.

Kavidu knew how a heart attack projected itself. She knew the feeling of a coronary thrombosis effect and she was sure she could identify stroke and paralysis as she listened to her father claim her and her brother and discuss her mother and grandsons burial. That was not enough. In front of the quiet gathering, the father was frothing on the mouth as he blasted the police for killing his wife and grandchild and how he was going to sue the killers and their employers.

Kavidu was not stupid. She was Young but stupid, she was not. She knew without doubt why she and her brother mattered to this man whom she had not seen for more than five years.

Taking a deep breath, Kavidu braced herself for the words she intended to speak. And she did.

“If I remember dad,” Kavidu started, “ the reason you threw us out that night five years ago is because you said my mother was unfaithful and my brother, whom you now call your son was not yours. What has changed? As for the Joe you call your grandson, do you even know what color he is?”

Kavidu took another deep breath before continuing.

“Death means much to you because you can sue the killers to get money. But let me tell you da...dad, go and sue. Get the money and build your life. But leave me and my brother alone. Unless you want the public digging in into our life’s which I no longer care about.”

Everyone was shocked, the father even more. The vehemence in the child’s voice was verbal murder. It chilled the hearts of the listeners.

“And father Peter,if we are no longer welcome here, we are ready to leave. Thanks for your help.” And Kavidu turned and went to the bedroom to wake the brother so they could take their leave.

But they didn't leave. Not that day or the next. Day three a female lawyer came to talk to Kavidu at the church grounds. Her story was video taped for presentation to court which was the next place she was meeting the father who had filed for custody of his children as it turned out.

Bad luck for him, Wendo had not been a victim of COVID 19. It was a throat infection that responded quickly to treatment. The court case caused quite a stir especially since it had to happen during social distancing and curfew days when entertainment was in short supply. Newsmen made a meal of the "Shameless death inheritor" as the daily's referred to Kavidu's father.

Before the judge could deliver judgement, Kavidu had got a sponsor for her education. Some other good Samaritan had got the family a place to stay for free for two years, and the best news was Wendo got a job at the church where Kavidu and her brother had sought refuge from Baby Star.

Kavidu's dream did not dim. She knew even more why she must do law. She owed children like her. She owed the weak a voice. As for government compensation over her mother and nephew's death, time will tell the outcome. If the judges bugled it, Kavidu was sure of one thing. She will revive it and justice would be served. She owed her mother that. She owed her nephew that. But most all, she owed the truth. For her family had suffered because Truth was never given a fair chance. Kavidu cast her own die. Law. Truth.

## **FOUR RESOLVES BY GERARD SARNAT**

OCD side of Awakened One,  
the Buddha loved to make  
up lists

of which this happens  
to be a fave shortish  
(4) version:

Truth Wisdom Peace  
Generosity  
-- thus

if sit just like an arhat  
--- upright, alert ---  
nada doubt

you too will deserve  
to be wakeful – no  
distance.

What prevents ease with  
how shit happens  
when it's true?

What can we offer that'll  
open all to generosity's  
wisdom

perhaps now shall point to  
peaceable essence exists  
in every out breath?

Strong meditation – Buddha  
exemplar mirror – bow  
to own non-self.

**MY CLASSMATE**  
**BY CHINUA EZENWA-OHAETO**

Onyinye was my classmate. I enjoyed hunting grasshoppers, picking flowers and building hand and foot mud houses with her. She often ran after me on the playground throwing sand: I laughed; she laughed.

Sometime ago, she had sat beside me in class. Then we heard the stomp-stomp of approaching feet from outside, which I assumed was the class teacher's. I took away the colour variety book I was entertaining her with, leaving bare only her arithmetic booklet. I didn't want the teacher's chastening.

"Look here," I engaged her. She kept her eyes to the arithmetic booklet.

"Three divides fifteen equals five," I began. She watched me count beads and did further arithmetic.

"Your turn," I said when I thought she understood my directions. "I ask some arithmetic; you give me answers. Okay?"

She nodded.

Then I asked questions. She muttered and failed to give me answers. I repeated the example, but nothing. I was irritated.



"How many times will I teach you? Blockhead! If it's to beg *akara* now, you can," I exploded. She gazed at me, then at the arithmetic book., then she moved and found herself another seat at the back of the class.

I glanced at her periodically but she never looked my way. I felt sorry.

The class teacher walked in and began teaching.

I wrote her a note after summoning enough courage; tucked it inside her locker. The next day, she saw the note and asked who had dropped it. Her voice gained weight each time she repeated her question. And soon it toppled on our heads.

"Who dropped this note?" She asked.

Two girls stretched the fingers. "We saw him near Onyinye's locker," they said.

I raised my head and met the girls' fingers pointing my way. I put my face the other way. I didn't want my eyes or disposition to let me out. Onyinye walked to the class teacher's corner with the note in her hand.

"You stubborn and nothing-for-good boy!" the class teacher yelled. She had called for me after reading what the note had. "Why d-did you allow the d-devil to use you?"

*Aunty, the d-devil didn't u-use me*, I murmured inside of my head. *The devil didn't use me.*

"Who wrote this, this note?" She thundered. "This love note!"

"I didn't write it, Aunty."

"The girls over there saw you at Onyinye's locker."

"It wasn't me, Aunty.

She picked her canes from where they laid.

"Will you tell me who wrote this now? Or should these canes force it out of you?"

"It wasn't me Aunty," I pleaded, as hard as I could. "It wasn't me."

I prayed to Saint Michael inside my head as I pleaded and pleaded and tears rolled down my cheeks. I was afraid of the canes. And when words managed to form in my mouth, I confessed to the class teacher that notes bear the name of the sender or something related to the sender, and that the note might be from a student in another class and that the heavens know that I am innocent.

After the words had rolled out finish, the class teacher looked down at me, then picked the note from her desk, looked at it and then me, before placing it back down.

I kept my face downward still; I couldn't stand looking at the class teacher in the face.

The class teacher after a long stare let me back to my seat. She warned the whole class she didn't want to get such a report ever again. I felt betrayed. And since then I had never allowed myself to be used by the-the devil.

Onyinye, though I was confused about her should have known it was from me, despite it was name free. For the times I had looked her way and our eyes caught; for the times I had helped her with assignments, shared my snacks with her and had held her hands. I should have known better.

On the playground, I wore a sullen look as I questioned and searched for the bangle, a gift Opeyemi, another classmate, had just given me moments ago.

Onyinye from her corner had grown on her face a disturbing countenance on sighting me accept it with smiles.

Opeyemi and two other classmates helped in the search, but gave up when it was obvious it couldn't be found.

When the break period rang over, I darted after Onyinye.

"I knew you took it," I muttered into her ear. She feigned indifference.

"I am sorry," I said. And gently planted my hand in hers and walked her into the class as a clear gleam decorated her face.

### **ON THE WAY TO THE CHANCERY BY STEVEN RAY SMITH**

On the way to the chancery  
I fell and broke my outlook  
into two jumbled screens  
and blamed the chancery for it

Which is right and which is wrong  
What is fair and what is not  
Who is sane and who is insane

But I never reached the chancery  
for Themis to tell me  
though I blamed her for not telling me  
Which cup of her confounding scale  
the two pulverized heaps of me  
tips down I may never know

And this went on until you finally said listen  
I have neither blindfold nor sword  
I cannot listen dispassionately nor can I fully judge you  
I don't know your answers but I am not stone-still silent either  
My love and your outlook are the only telltales you have  
Believe them like they were actual answers

### **THE OTHER SIDE BY ANTHONY R. PEZZULA**

Office Jack Carter couldn't place this street. It looked like many of the streets he patrolled in his time as a police officer, yet it was unfamiliar to him. It had a strange feeling, quiet, abandoned as though the main street in a ghost town.

"Where the hell am I?" he said aloud to himself. "What is this place?"

“Hell if I know,” came a voice behind him.

Jack jumped at the sound. He turned and saw a young black man approaching him. The man was wearing blue jeans low on his hips as if they were about to fall to his ankles. He had black and white basketball sneakers on and a hooded gray sweatshirt, hood up covering most of his face.

“Who the hell are you?” said Jack staring at the stranger, trying to get a better look.

“You don’t know?” the man said.

“No, should I?” Jack replied.

“Hell yeah,” said the man as he dropped his hood.

Jack squinted at the newly revealed face, calling on his memory bank to place it, then it hit him. His eyes widened and words struggled to escape his lips.

“Wait,” he stuttered, “you’re...your’re...”

“Yeah,” the man said, “now you got it, I see the flicker in your eyes. You remember me doncha?”

“How could I forget, Donel Madison.”

“Yeah man, the guy you shot.”

“Yes, I wish our paths never crossed. But wait...you...you...”

“Yeah, I died. You killed me. Something ain’t it?”

“But...but..” Jack stammered, struggling to grasp the situation.

“I can’t ‘splain it neither,” said Donel. “I don’t know what this place is, but someone meant for us to meet up again, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know what to think,” said Jack, “but if you’re looking for revenge I still have my...” he reached for his gun, but his holster was empty. He looked around, searching for his lost weapon.

“I suspect guns ain’t allowed here,” said Donel calmly. “Besides I ain’t looking for revenge. I ain’t looking for nothing. I found myself here like you, but I been here longer is all.”

Jack relaxed a bit, but looked puzzled.

“But why,” he said, “why are we here? Why are we in the same place? Where’s everybody else?”

“I don’t know,” Donel replied. “Lookit, I don’t know any more than you, but there has to be a reason, no?”

“But what?” Jack said. “Maybe I’m supposed to apologize or something? Do you think that’s it?”

“Don’t know,” said Donel, “Do you feel like apologizing? ‘Cause it ain’t gonna do no good, I’ll tell you that straight off.”

Jack turned and took a few steps away from Donel, head bowed as though thinking. He mumbled to himself “*Apologize!*” He looked to the sky and continued, slightly louder, “Why should I apologize? He left me no choice.” He turned to face Donel and said, “I had to shoot you.”

“You had to shoot me...are you shitten me?” Donel said. “You didn’t have to shoot nobody.”

“I thought you had a gun, it looked like you had something in your hand,” said Jack.

“I didn’t though, did I,” said Donel.

“As it turned out, no, but how was I to know. Do you know what it’s like patrolling those streets, tension every night?” Jack said.

“Do I know what it’s like he says,” Donel said aloud to himself. He looked Jack in the eye and said, “I grew up on those streets, so yeah, I know what it’s like.”

Jack hesitated, then said, “Why’d you run anyway? Why didn’t you just do what I said?”

“Hey man,” said Donel, “I got friends, and cousins, who were beat up pretty bad by cops, so complying ain’t always the best option. Besides, I didn’t want to go to no jail. I heard stories about what goes on there. I just took a look at you and figured I could outrun you.

Jack’s back straightened, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Looks like you had one too many doughnuts man,” Donel said smirking.

“I’m in great shape pal,” said Jack.

“Still,” said Donel, “I had years and speed on you. If I didn’t trip over that thrash can I would have made it.”

Jack shook his head, “So when you were on the ground and I had my gun on you, why not just do what I asked, spread your hands and legs, stay on your stomach, why didn’t you listen?”

“Asked?” said Donel in disbelief. “You make it sound like you were all polite and thoughtful. Hell, you were barking out those orders, sounded out of control to me. I was scared and hurt. I wanted to see how close you were, if I could still get up and run.”

“But,” said Jack, “I was telling you to stay where you were, to keep your hands in sight. But you reached into your pocket.

Donel stared at him for a second. “I was getting my phone man. I wanted to record what was going down. I yelled for you to put the gun down, yelled that I didn’t have a gun.”

“And I was supposed to believe you?” said Jack. “Why should I? It was a crime scene, you were running away not complying, that’s a threat in my book.

“Didn’t you have a taser?” said Donel. “Couldn’t you have used that instead of a gun?”

“They don’t always work or work well,” Jack replied. “It might not have stopped you if you did have a gun. No, I followed protocol.”

“Protocol,” Donel repeated, “protocol cost me my life.”

“No,” said Jack, “your actions cost you your life.

Donel looked around in frustration, not knowing where to go next with this discussion. Finally he said, “I didn’t do nothing wrong.”

Jack looked at him in disbelief. “Oh no,” he said, “there’s nothing wrong with robbing a store is there? How can I reason with a guy like this?”

“That was my friend Scooter’s idea,” said Donel, as his eyes glazed over with the memory.

It was a hot summer’s day. Donel and Scooter were sitting on the stoop of the building housing the apartment where Scooter’s family lived. They were sipping on Cokes after just getting back from playing hoops at the basketball courts down the street. They had on shorts and sneaks, Donel wore a Knick’s jersey while Scooter wore his Net’s jersey.

They seemed to favor separate teams in most sports, which led to some spirited discussions. Scooter was tall and lanky, and known for his rebounding skills on the court. Donel was a few inches shorter, but was quick and a good shooter. Their teamwork together made them in demand for most games.

They wiped off their sweat with towels they always carried with them to summer games, enjoying the slight breeze that provided a little relief.

“Good game man,” said Scooter, offering to clink his Coke bottle with Donel’s

“Yeah,” said Donel, returning the clink. “Nice work today, that was fun.”

“It’s always fun to win,” said Scooter as he took a long swig.

“No doubt,” said Donel, finishing his drink. “I gotta get going man, I’ll be late for dinner and my old man don’t like it when you’re late for dinner.”

“Hold up,” said Scooter. “I got something I need to do, and you can help. It won’t take long.”

“What’s that?” said Donel doubtfully.

“We can use some cash right?” said Scooter. “I mean its Saturday, and we want to have a good time tonight right? You need cash for that, and I’m short on dough.”

“So…” said Donel hesitantly.

“So there’s this new store just opened a few blocks from here. We never hang out in that neighborhood, nobody knows us there. I figure I can run in there, scare them up a little, and come out with some bills,” said Scooter quickly, as if talking fast would convince Donel.

“Are you crazy?” said Donel. “We ain’t done nothing like that since we were kids, and that was just taking candy and stuff.”

“I know,” said Scooter, “but we ain’t working this summer, and cash is low. Even for my folks. C’mon, you ain’t gotta do nothing but stand outside and watch out for cops or civilians, just knock on the window if somethin ain’t right. I’ll split the dough with you and we’ll have some fun later. C’mon, it won’t take long, in and out, lickity split.”

“Man,” said Donel, “why you gotta put me in this position?”

“C’mon man, ain’t no risk to you,” said Scooter. “Alls you gotta do is keep watch and warn me, then you can run. I’ll take all the heat if something goes wrong, which it won’t.”

“I don’t like it,” said Donel.

“C’mon, do a brother a favor,” Scooter said giving his best puppy dog look.

“Shit,” said Donel. “Alright, but I’m gonna be upfront with you, something ain’t right and I’m outta there.”

“After the window knock though, right?” said Scooter.

“Yeah, yeah,” Donel replied. “Let’s go, let’s get this over with.”

They proceeded to walk the two blocks down the street and over a few corners to the convenience store that still had the “Grand Opening” sign hanging above the entrance. Scooter smiled and hit Donel’s arm, pointing inside the store.

“We got good timing, no other customer’s inside. Let’s do this,” he said as he entered the store.

“Hurry up,” said Donel as he looked around nervously. He watched Scooter head straight to the man behind the counter who looked to Donel to be from a Middle Eastern country, or India, or somewhere like that. Whether there was a language problem or what, he could see Scooter start to yell and the man yelling back while turning his head as though to assure someone in the back was hearing what was going on. When Donel glanced back around toward the street, he saw the police car turning the corner down the block. He knocked on the window and ran. He took one look back and saw Scooter burst out of the door and run in the opposite direction. The police car screeched to a halt, and Donel heard a voice yelling “Stop, stop,” but couldn’t tell at first if it was directed at him or Scooter. He took one look over his shoulder and saw that the cop was running his way. That’s when he hit the trash can.

“It doesn’t matter whose idea it was, you were still part of it,” Jack said. “Why do you kids have to do that anyway? Haven’t you heard of an honest day’s work?”

“Lookit,” Donel said angrily, “you don’t know me. I been working every summer the past few years. Scooter too. But there was nothing available. You know that saying that necessity is the mother of invention. Well poverty is the mother of detention.”

“Oh brother,” said Jack. “Tell you what, say ‘pop.’”

“What?”

“Say ‘pop’ go ahead, say it.”

“Why?”

“Just say it,” Jack insisted.

Donel looked at him doubtfully, but finally said “Pop.”

Jack smirked and said, “That’s the sound of your head coming out of your ass.”

“Sheeit,” exclaimed Donel, “where did you get that one?”

“Drill sergeant in basic training,” said Jack. “Listen; there are plenty of people down on their luck who don’t resort to crime. Just because you need money doesn’t mean you have to go out and steal. Most poor people don’t.”

“I know, and I ain’t one who does either.” Donel said defensively. “I told you it was Scooter, not me. I just happened to be there. I ain’t no thief. Truth is I couldn’t work because I needed to take some courses to improve my grades. I intended to enroll in community college and needed to boost my credentials.”

“Really?” said Jack. “What were you going to take?”

“What do you care?” Donel replied.

“Just curious,” said Jack. “C’mon, did you have something in mind you wanted to pursue?”

Donel hesitated for a few seconds, then said, “Yeah kind of. My Grandma’s been sick the past few years and we had caregivers come to the house, you know, nurses, aides, folks like that. She loved each and every one of them, and those folks loved what they were doing, I could tell. I thought maybe I could help someone and get that feeling. It would have been hard, but I was looking forward to it. I had plans...big plans.”

“That’s...that’s nice,” Jack stuttered. “so you wanted to be a nurse?”

“I probly ain’t got the smarts for that,” Donel admitted. “But maybe some kind of medical technician or aide or EMT or something. I did okay in school subjects I liked, so I got the

brochures and was sorting through them around the time I ran into you. But I never... Anyway, what about you? What's your story?"

"Not much of a story," said Jack. "I was in the military, did a tour in Iraq. I was an MP, liked it, so when my time was up I applied for the police force. I wanted to help people too."

"So how'd you get here?" said Donel. "What happened to you?"

Jack frowned, got a spacy look on his face, obviously struggling to think, to remember. Suddenly his eyes widened and he straightened himself. He looked at Donel with a shocked expression. "I was shot too," he said. "Right here," he pointed to his chest. "Boy it hurt."

"You don't have to tell me," said Donel.

"It's coming back," said Jack. There was a call of a disturbance at a house."

"Where was this?" Donel asked.

"On the west side," said Jack. "I got transferred there after the incident with you. Supposed to be a safer area," he said laughing.

"Black or white?" Donel asked.

"What?"

"That's a mixed area," said Donel. "Were the folks in that house black or white?"

"Black," said Jack as his eyes glazed over with the memory.

Jack walked up to the house, which looked like every other house on this block, neat brick one family homes, more like bungalows. The quiet on the block only served to highlight the loud male voice coming from inside. As he got closer to the door, he could also hear a baby crying. He knocked on the door and the male voice quieted. A young black girl meekly opened the door slightly. Jack could see a nasty bruise on the left side of her face, a fresh bump rising underneath.

"M'am, we got a call of a disturbance here. Are you okay?" Jack said, trying to look over her shoulder.

"Who is it?" came a booming male voice from inside, shouting over the wails of the infant.

"It's the police," said the woman fearfully.

"Answer my question m'am," Jack persisted. "Are you okay?"

Suddenly she was pushed aside by a large, husky black man who appeared in the doorway. "None of your damn business," he said in Jack's face, smelling of alcohol.

"I'm sorry to intrude," Jack said firmly, "but I have to respond to the call we got. I need to talk to the young lady."

"The hell you do," the man said, attempting to close the door. Jack put his foot in the way, preventing him from doing so.

"Look sir," said Jack, "I either talk to her here, or we all go down to the station and have a conversation."

The man glowered at Jack and stepped aside reluctantly. Jack entered the house and saw a table overturned and a crib in the corner of the living room with a crying infant inside. The woman was cowering in the corner, sobbing, and clearly terrified. Jack strode over

to her and bent down, putting his hand on her shoulder. "M'am," he said gently, "are you okay?" She looked up at him and just shrugged her shoulders, glancing over his shoulder looking at the man towering over Jack.

Jack turned and looked at him, standing to face him. "Sir," I need you to step back and stand over there," pointing to the opposite end of the room. The man glared at Jack at first, then slowly turned and staggered away. Jack again squatted and put his face close to hers. "M'am," he said quietly, "did he hit you?"

"What did you say?" the man suddenly shouted. "Get the hell out of my house."

Jack stood and turned "I'm not gonna tell you again, shut your mouth while I talk to her," Jack said angrily. The man's fists closed and his body tensed. Suddenly he reached behind him and pulled a gun. Jack hesitated, and started to reach for his when he heard a loud noise.

"Why'd you hesitate?" Donel asked.

"I don't know, it happened so fast. Maybe after what happened with you..."

"So you're gonna blame me for getting shot?"

"I don't know, maybe deep down I didn't want anything like that to happen again."

"Not buying it," said Donel. "Completely different situation. Take some responsibility damn it! You used bad judgement with me and bad judgment with him. That's what got you shot plain and simple."

"It's split second decisions and it's not perfect I grant you. But how about you? You need to take responsibility for getting shot too," Jack said.

Donel sighed. Then he made a sudden move toward Jack who raised his fists. Donel stopped and looked at Jack, who stood there tensed, ready to fight. "Man," Donel said, "you're still threatened by a black man, even here. I was just testing you to see what you'd do. I should have known."

Jack relaxed his stance, but not the look on his face. "Test? What kind of test is that? You make an aggressive move and you expect me to what, welcome you with open arms?"

"I expect you to react as you would if I was white, maybe give it a beat to see what I was intendin."

Jack tilted his head and gave Donel a knowing look. "Here it comes," he said, "the race card."

"Ain't no card," said Donel, "it's the truth."

"You know," Jack said, "that time with you was the first time in seven years on the force that I fired my weapon."

"Lucky me," said Donel.

"Point is it's not something I did lightly, it was a split second decision. That comes with the uniform, lots of quick decisions and judgments. Most of them don't involve life or death though."

Donel thought for a minute, then said, "I get that there are some jobs like that. I seen doctors and nurses thinking on the fly too, but still..."

"I had no choice," Jack interrupted.



“There’s always choices,” Donel said. “Be honest man, if I was white would you have been so quick to shoot?”

Jack opened his mouth to answer, then hesitated, pacing a few steps. He stopped and turned toward Donel and said, “You know I was asked what you just asked me a thousand times since the incident...if it was a white man would you have acted differently. And my answer was always that I would have done nothing different. But in a moment of weakness when I was alone with my wife Sarah, I...I admitted to her that I don’t know what I might have done if the kid was white instead of black.”

“I can tell you right now,” said Donel, “if I was white I’d still be alive. My Ma would have her son. I have no doubt.”

“No,” Jack objected.

“C’mon man, cops, white cops ‘specially, treat us differently. I don’t know, maybe you guys can’t help yourselves but it’s there. We see it every day. We feel it every day. It’s part of our lives to deal with it all the time. Hell, my uncle is a cop and he told me when he goes to Macy’s or someplace like that, the security folks follow him around. A big black guy must be up to no good right? He usually whips out his badge and tells them they don’t need to do it, but he shouldn’t have to deal with that, don’t you think?”

“I can’t speak to that,” Jack replied. “All I can tell you is that encounter with you changed my life.”

“Yeah,” said Donel, “me too.”

“We were gonna start a family,” Jack said wistfully.

“I was gonna start my life,” said Donel.

Jack looked at Donel sternly, “If only you did what I said.”

Donel stared back defiantly and said, “If only you didn’t shoot.”

Jack slumped a bit and said, “We’re not a judge and jury; we can only go by what we observe.”

Donel looked skyward, glanced all around before saying “You know, I got this feeling that I have to move on.”

Jack thought a moment before saying “Yeah, me too.”

“We didn’t get anywhere did we?” Donel said.

“Hell, I don’t know,” Jack replied.

They turned in opposite directions and started to walk away from each other. After a few steps they both stopped and turned as though on cue. They looked at each other for a few seconds. Jack nodded. Donel returned the nod. They turned and resumed where they were going, each not knowing just where that was.

## **DYING EMPIRE**

**BY BUWASO IBRAHIM RAZACK**

It fades off just like a candle light  
Sinks like an overweight ship on the sea  
Slumbers just like a newborn baby  
Melts off like snow ice:

The Empire is dying  
The Emperor is falling  
There is no more enough to hold him up  
Betrayal is no more hidden, corruption is the code of the day  
What a mess  
Choices are no more made on the value and motto of the country  
For God and my country is now for me and my family  
What a shame  
Just rewinded my thoughts to 1986 when you overtook your rivals, I was barely un-  
born  
Your promise was to protect and serve your nation  
So blinded our late ancestors were  
I am so disappointed when you brought it out to the world's broad light and you said  
you were saving your self and family.  
CCN, BBC , Aljazera and all national media recorded that  
I am tormented by the fact that U knew you will never serve us and my country but rip  
off it's beauty  
We no more have tears of joy just like it was in 1989  
Tears of hate have filled our brains and choked us to no more breath of our souls  
Streets filled with nothing but hate  
I see my fist up it's an old-school sign that means wake up  
Silence me, the same voice shall awaken  
Ghettos are a breeding site  
We are a vice you can't wipe out  
Dear revolutionary  
Stay warned.

**BORDER VIOLENCE**  
**BY UMA MENON**  
*IHRAF 2020 Youth Fellow*

this is where i draw a line  
i say to the words  
that tear me apart in two

& now i will tell you there  
are words in my fists  
that are carefully hand-picked

correctly spelled because these  
are not true mistakes

just fables                      of mankind

it is not the words                      it is  
the people    who laugh  
at splitting bodies    from afar

those are the people    it is them  
whom i ask                      who *are* you  
from where                      have you built

your arrogance            is it fenced  
is it concrete            does it split me  
vertically                      or horizontally

## **REBIRTH** **BY SMEETHA BHOUMIK**

A dark river flowed, quite serpentine  
In its waters were coils of a serpentine.

It raged on, devastating land and woods  
Insatiable desires of a serpentine.

Its ravages wrought havoc, when a sage  
on its shore, sat long to grasp what's serpentine.

He sat there meditating for days on end  
Crying for a spell for the serpentine.

One day as a man came by, he said  
"Can you look in the river, see serpentine?"

The man looked down and saw himself  
Mirrored on every scale of the serpentine!

Afraid, he ran back to get his brother,  
Alas, he too mirrored the serpentine !

Slowly, more people gathered there,  
Seeing themselves in the serpentine .

First hundreds, then thousands, then more

Came by, and saw themselves in the serpentine.

By now everyone heard what the sage  
Was saying : ' tame your desires, stop serpentine'

His words took root in peoples minds  
They went away to quell their serpentine.

First trees, then woods, then the homes of the poor  
Got a golden touch free of serpentine.

All around merry bells were ringing,  
People rejoicing in freedom from old serpentine.

It felt so light and good in circles green,  
Rings of roses, untouched by serpentine.

## **THE GARDEN OF REMEMBRANCE BY MARTHA PATTERSON**

A brother and sister stood in the public garden of a city, looking at an engraved stone marker.

“Michael,” said James. “I knew him at school. He was on one of the planes.”

“On 9/11?” asked Rachel.

“Just an acquaintance – someone I saw in the dining commons sometimes.” Rachel shuddered. James spoke again. “People suck.”

“Not everyone.”

A Middle Eastern man wearing a suit and a well-dressed younger woman with a bouquet of daffodils approached. They looked at the marker, then turned to James and Rachel.

“My people did not do this,” announced the Middle Eastern man. The young woman he was with reprimanded him.

“Abdul. Be quiet.” But her companion persisted.

He sat on a bench. “There is too much judgment in the world. I have lived in this country since graduating from University. I’m sorry about 9/11. But I could have been on one of those planes if I’d come to the U.S. earlier.”

Rachel spoke next. “My name’s Rachel. This is my brother, James.”

“I am Abdul. This is my sister, Afifa. Anyway, I’m sorry about 9/11. Many people in this city look at me as if I’m the enemy. I have brown skin.”

THE GARDEN OF REMEMBRANCE 2

Rachel interrupted. “But why did you come here today? To the Garden of Remembrance? You’re so dressed up.”

Afifa smoothed the fabric of her dress. "We come from our mother's funeral. Cancer. After the service, we wanted to walk for a while. I go to college here."

Abdul butted in. "You're revealing too much about us, Afifa." He turned to James. "I must say, you are both dressed casually for a memorial park. It would be better to wear clothes suiting the occasion. It has to do with Pride."

"That's bullshit," said James.

Startled, Afifa looked quickly at him. "Hm," she said, trying to soothe things. "Let me tell you a fairy tale. From the Saudis. A Bedouin lost his son in a cattle market. The boy was stolen. The father hired someone to shout that one thousand piasters was offered for his child's return. But the man who held the boy was greedy and wanted more money. So he waited. Next day, only five hundred piasters were offered. The kidnapper held out. The third day, only one hundred piasters were offered. The kidnapper hurried to return the boy and collect his small reward."

James cut her off. "The father was cheap."

"But wait," said Afifa. "The kidnapper was curious, and asked the father why the reward had gotten smaller each day. "Well," the father said, "that first day my son refused to eat with his kidnapper. To bring him back with pride, I would have paid one thousand piasters. The second day, when hunger made him forget to behave nobly, he accepted food, and I offered five hundred. But when he begged, his return was worth only one hundred piasters."

James shifted in his seat. "And the moral is?"

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Afifa laughed. "Hold out for a thousand piasters even if you're hungry! Pride is important in the Arab world."

"You see?" grinned Abdul. "I wear a suit every day. Pride! For instance, I love my own country for its physical beauty. And I miss the food."

"Then why don't you go back?" asked James, annoyed.

"An impertinent question. I don't love its politics. But I apologize. I was rude first. ...May I show you a magic trick?"

Rachel and Afifa giggled as ABDUL pulled a scarf from his pocket, balled it up in his right hand, and waved both hands in the air. He opened his right hand and there was nothing in it. Then he drew the same scarf from within the left sleeve of his jacket.

"You see?" he said. "Nothing is what it seems, nothing is easy. Like 9/11. Like the conflict of living in a foreign country when you are constantly blamed for evil done by others. And perhaps I am not what you thought - I am not "easy," either."

"How did you do that trick?" asked Rachel.

"I read a book by Houdini." Abdul smiled. "And now we'll go."

Afifa suddenly plucked a daffodil from her bouquet and handed it to Rachel. "When you get home, put this flower in water, to remember all those souls who perished on 9/11."

Abdul bowed. "My sister is too romantic. It was interesting meeting you." He and his sister walked away.

"They gave us something," said Rachel. "A fairy tale and magic. See? Not everybody sucks."

## THE SHADES OF BLACK

BY RANA BITTAR

*For George Floyd*

Nine minutes. Long enough for history to unfold before the eyes  
Long enough to squeeze forgetting out of collective sleepy lungs  
one breath at a time

Enough to display the scenes hidden behind the dust  
the murders tucked in two-page reports in a folder in a cabinet in a room in the base-  
ment of some guarded fortified courts.

Nine minutes. Long enough to slash open the cocoon

Long enough to wake the giants in the cave

Long enough to stretch from pole to pole

circle around the equator—like a mouth

opened aghast, nothing to say except

*I can't breathe*

Nine minutes. Long enough to melt the layer of paint coating the murals we're told to  
obey

Long enough to reconstruct the faces of the secret servicemen who stood by the door of  
my college dorm

Long enough to whisper the names of the girls, slain in the name of honor in some far-  
away kings' lands

Long enough to recite the voice of my instructor

*Go back and learn English*, he said, 30 years ago

*Go back, where?* I should have asked. *I am an American citizen now*

I had more than nine minutes to say something then, but I didn't

I now speak

of the shields of wrought-with-privilege skin

Nine minutes

Corpses of rebels dragged on the street of my hometown. Dictators wearing blue and  
guns.

Nine minutes

I see all the resumes ripped in nine seconds before being read:

the name doesn't sound right.

Nine minutes you push a baby out of your birth canal

and she screams and she cries. There is no going back

Nine minutes

The face stares at the camera while pushing Life out of another man

Cold stare to boil nations to burn cities to cleanse brains to move mountains to yank  
roots from roots and turn the skies upside down.

Nine minutes. My daughter will never be pushed behind a boy

Nine minutes. My accent will not drag my face in the mud

Nine minutes to erase color signifiers from the brain

Nine minutes. Free the people of shackles and nooses

No cries of tortures in prisons. No rape behind fancy titles. No resumes in the trash because they hold a foreign name. Not again.

Nine minutes: the collar the iron bit the whip come to life

Not all lynching uses ropes

One can be killed without hanging without burning killed by smothering breath, opportunities, and potentials

Nine minutes. Long enough to measure the distance between "white only" and "colored" bathrooms the chasm of the mindlessness between the front and the back seats of a bus between two water fountains on the same block

Nine minutes is longer than 50 years passed.

Different disguise. Different script.

Nine minutes. Long enough to plow into murderer fathers, rapist uncles, beating husbands, abusive school teachers, killer cops, dictators kings, instructors. All have blood on their hands. All kneeled one time or another over a helpless neck to squeeze out lives

Nine minutes.

Let the oppressed rise.

**COMMUNIST CLICHÉ**  
**BY MICHAEL T. SMITH**

Isolated by all but the sun  
(the sun -- who had no choice  
but to wake up today),  
poor slave to the lesser turnings --

Oh, to live in exile,  
Where to sit down cross-legged  
Is a rigmarole, and  
to sculpt clouds is a full-time job.

No one has yet been able  
To plow with the rhythm of winds.  
No one has harvested  
With refined grace –

But they could gently puff a cigar  
to the changing moods  
Of the temperamental moon.  
They could watch their family grow  
Holding hands  
With time.

To else read that what you feel is wrong --  
the newspaper deflowered a hope  
today.  
So I'll use this sheet to wrap  
my son's little straw hat  
that he grew out  
Of -- to put it in storage, and hope  
That the cynicism of the ink  
Does not leak through. May it  
Defend all men.

“Love happens in the street,  
standing in the dust,”  
where a single match can serve  
as a spotlight --

We dance with enough love  
to move the earth itself --  
it's so easy to fall in love  
(and sometimes easier to fall out)

Magic happens in the basement,  
without any light. And that's  
not a quote.

**[MALCOLM] X MARKS THE SPOT.  
BY GERARD SARNAT**

**EDEN**

**i. Pre-June Swoon**



Final day of May, hadn't touched Yanai since around his first birthday party.  
How do I remember that date?  
Party hats are still in car undriven since winter.  
The no-longer baby actually toddles and babbles.  
Three-year-old brother seems so mature, much more independent playing now.  
As if reclaiming once-occupied territory, Liav asks where his favorite airplane, flashlight,  
necklace, "rackaroni" are.  
Out of pure exuberance to be back in second home, he hugs plus kisses younger sibling.  
For fleeting seconds, scanning my childhood, I can't come up with one such an act of af-  
fection toward my own little sister.  
Which makes me sad.  
But it's deliciously good both grandsons have each other during this time of sequester.  
Their mom, our daughter, is pleased as punch to return (at last!) to take an early nap in  
her bedroom where she was a newborn.  
Overall, a very very glorious Sunday morning.

## **ii. Now All Of Creation**

Perusing Psalters,  
not that much is new these days  
being in sequester,  
but today I went down one unique  
lovely new pathway--  
going way-way back to great-great-  
great-great-grandfather  
Jacob Ben Isaac Gesundheit, Warsaw  
Chief Rabbi, a scholarly  
man who was driven from his position  
by Hasids with pitchforks  
-- whereby my parents' parents' parents  
made physical love thus leading  
to me & ditto not only for my good wife  
but also our three grown children  
which somehow seemed simply beautiful  
with no trace of slightest impropriety  
because that was the way life truly unfolded.

## **ROUGH DAY, ROUGH WEEK, ROUGH YEAR OUT OF SORTS COUNTRY'S QUADRU- PLE TANKA**

### **i. Whitelash**

Teetotaler don't drink  
so no DWIs,

I'm alt-right too who  
thinks they should be arrested  
if ever Driving While Black.

## **ii. Pandemic Hotspots**

Seattle response  
exemplary, WDC  
LA, NYC  
not to viral spread mayhem  
after police slay George Floyd.

## **iii. But George Floyd Can't Be Avoided**

Can never unsee  
Twin Towers jumpers choosing  
one form certain death,  
inferno or cement splat  
-- so bad view of void's censored.

## **iv. Worm Turns**

Cop car runs into  
non-violent protesters:  
has The Big Apple,  
once the world's greatest city,  
become rotten to its core?

## **Trouble Trouble Trouble, Nothing But Trouble**

Smoke raining down,  
trudgin' to work in blazer  
and gas mask

I ask the rainbow  
of peaceful protestors  
who shine light

through muddled haze  
volunteering  
to clean up glass shards

well as paint over  
graffiti that covered  
our small family store

stocked with

three generations  
of sweat and blood

before went up in blazes  
then turned into rubble,  
whether there

are likely to be more  
outsiders causing  
trouble tonight.

**Wild goose chase**

has always been one phrase  
you didn't really understand

even though back then  
Daddy said it had something

to do with white lead rider  
in our story's horse race getting

pursued just like wild geese  
flying in exact formation

which made absolutely no  
sense to me 'til seventy years

later when looking up up up  
through smoky blue sky

with grandsons in car seats  
we saw birds in their V

converge suddenly to shift  
from heading due west

past city of Santa Monica  
toward the Pacific Ocean

-- abruptly veering north  
where they maybe hoped

to avoid infinite smoldering  
coal-hot embers seemingly

were coming from burning  
buildings below, but

turned out Van Nuys  
in San Fernando Valley

was also now coldly set on  
fire amidst razed placards

which previously advertised  
that Black Lives Matter.

## **MARKS OF CHARACTER BY PRATIBHA S BILGI**

One innocent girl  
imprisoned in one dark room  
hands and legs were tied  
In a state of utter perplexity  
frightened and distressed  
appealing for help  
but, no one's heart melted  
And no one came to set her free  
After a long time,  
someone's trampling sent shivers  
all over her fragile frame  
Her little heart became faint  
There appeared a woman,  
could she be the fairy God mother ?  
She freed her from fetters  
by which she was bound.  
Because of that on her hands and legs  
The marks of chords were visible  
but the invisible marks branded in her heart  
where she was imprisoned for a lifetime  
that wretched moment when she was  
abducted by someone,  
separated from parents

sold in brothel  
just for a handful of money.  
This is the place that has  
Many entrances  
but with no exit  
and from that same day  
leaves a lease of life  
trying to efface all the marks  
which were imprinted on her character !!!

## **LETTER TO GOD**

### **BY MBIZO CHIRASHA**

Somewhere beside Zvagona hills, near Zvamapere 'kopje of hyenas', adjacent to the foothills of Dayataya mountain, lie bones and spirits of my great grandfathers and their descendants. I love this land.

Every rain season, Zvagona hills are village brides fitted in green dresses with floral doek's over their heads. Their lush skin shimmes blue from a distance in the haze of December sun. Usually, autumn arrives with god's gifts of multi-colored costumes of blooming flowers, their petals nodding erotically to the hesitant sun. The sun winks back secretly to the smiling flowers. Bees and cicadas haunt them like delinquent boys to a village damsel. This time, the earth becomes a beautiful princess scented with natural perfume and clad in floral gowns of pink, yellow, white, peach and ox-blood red. June is a vicious dog. It brings howling winds. Winter's canines graze deep into our lives. The earth is undressed into utter nudity. Elephant grass salutes to the passing wind like grandfathers surrendering life. Our hills spot jailbird's bald shave as they nod to winter's sirens: whirlwind and dust ripples. Forests stand shell-shocked in their torn overalls. Flowers are tightlipped, their cousins rot into extinction, waiting for rain when the earth is born again.

The cold bruised sun is a patch on the undergarments of grey horizons. This time, the moon is a hesitant bride. Nights are ink-black and unfriendly. Hyenas wail in pain of winter's bite, regular face-booking of monkeys is on hold. Cicadas are silent like birds. Sometimes hills weep to each other under the veil of mist and the shivering moon, lulling our somber souls into sleep until the next morning. When morning comes, the baldheaded hills are ready for a fight, standing proud in anticipation of sunshine or rain. Alas, the biting winds persist and the hills are resilient too, similar to the undying spirits of peasants eking out life from tracks of hard red earth on the fringes of Zvagona hills. At night, the hills are draped in robes of white mist. Toward dawn, they fit onto skirts of grey and top gear of blue.

We are told ancestors walked alongside the mist at nights and in mornings they would go into deep sleep. The mystery of Zvagona hills, hills of home. During that season, we stack loads of firewood for warmth, cooking meals and brewing traditional beer. We live off the forests.

When Gods are angry, the earth is clad in rags like an imbecile. It wears a black torn monkey hat over itself like a pick-pocket. The air is taunt with foul smell of decaying lives. Baboon's sermons are placed in God's wardrobe. Our creased faces tell sorry tales of poverty and hunger gnawing the pits of our bellies.

When the red glow of heat persists like in hell.

Silence and barrenness are woven together onto red earth. While rivers become white-washed skeletons of dry sand. Elders speak in tongues to the wind. We lose their words in the pleats of their elderly language. After some days, they traverse to the end of the earth to supplicate Zame, the spirit of rain. Njelele, Zame's disciple, directs them to Nyami Nyami, the goddess of water. They are told to wash their feet and dance to Gods. They are punished for replacing forests with concrete jungles. Birds and spirits of the land are now vagabonds. They are told the earth is simmering in abomination and Gods are angry and choked with carbon laced fumes. They are warned of the coming of devil's triplets: hunger, heat waves and cyclones. They pay their ornaments, applaud the gods and return to their hovels underneath the fringes of Zvagona hills.

Later, when heavens get overexcited. Gods wash our sins with tears of their joy, rains wash and bless our land. The earth is born again and is dressed to kill in its usual green gowns and floral doek's. We dance to the clap of thunder. Camera flashes of lightening wink at us.

Our poverty marinates, yellow maize teeth grin to sudden glows of lightning. Sometimes lightning jolts sink our tender hearts into our rib-boxes. Zvagona hills gyrate under the grip of thunder.

We dance still for the blessing of rain and rebirth. Our planting fields are patches of alluvial earth between the hems of the hills and the banks of Mamvuramachena "river of white waters". Sooner pumpkins bred like rabbits, veldts wear a silver cap of water and new dark green military combat of sprouting elephant grass. Smells of fresh dung and the scent of fresh udder mik are our morning brew. The new grass fattens our cows, their oily skins shimmer under God's obedient sun.

Our mothers traverse from hill to hill harvesting mushroom, *nhedzi*, *zvihombiro*, *nzeveyambuya nezhouchuru* 'names of different kind of mushrooms'. Wild mushroom is an African delicacy, a delicacy that raises us from mucus drooling kindergartens into goat bearded grown-ups.

Wild fruits of *maroro*, *nhengeni* and *nhunguru* are showered to us by the excited Gods. Bushes became our second homes. We dry fruits and mushroom for the future with the aid of our loving grandmothers. We salivate to the rich fart of roasting meat and baking bread emitting from kitchen huts. Grass beautifies the earth as food beautifies lives. We enjoy to see our goats getting fat. Bush honey is abundant. We fight successful battles with ferocious red bees for the mouthwatering delicacy, *dendende* sweet red honey. We accompany the red honey hunt with a song

*Sunga musoro wedendende*

*Sunga wakanaka dendedende*

*Sunga musoro wededende ,*

*sunga wakanaka dendende*

*Sunga wakanaka dendende*  
*sunga wakanaka dendende*

The rhythm has returned.

When cockerels announce the new days, eastern hills are beautifully capped with the glow of orange hats from the sparkling sun rays. Baboons cuddle each other in the wake of dawn romance. Rock rabbits jive to the acoustics of cicada tunes and to the discord of village sounds. Mother monkeys rebuke their babies from over eating. Down the stream, fish and toads bathe in smoking falls of fresh water. They are home again.

*Shezu* 'honey bird' spoil the festival by singing a warning hymn, maybe for another drought to come or death of a reputable person. Nights are stitched with threads of hyena's laughter and the syntactic hymns of owls.

Our elders sing in contented choruses, *nhaka inhara* meaning 'the year is blessed with rains'.

We sing to the silver white moon that is fresh from God's mouth as it sits on its throne, over the fontanelles of Zvagona hills, *Mwedzi wagara ndira uyo tigo tigo ndira* – and later with time the moon is ripe to go we bade her farewell *mwedzi waora ndira tigo tigo ndira*.

\*\*\*\*\*

Now many years have passed since I left for the city, two decades away from years of dance and abundance. The land is now a wretched vagabond. I am sitting underneath the ragged skirts of mystery hills, pondering if my great ancestor's bones and spirits are still lying here.

I see the luxury of rotating seasons is long lost in the abrupt silence of this land. The tenor of birdsongs and baritones of baboons on the mountain zenith is no more. Birds and baboons are long gone, maybe to blessed climes. The joyous scream of hyenas and jackals at dawn was cut short. The joy of reeds dancing to the soprano of mighty streams was silenced. A deadly silence.

The sun's heat is menacing as if tongs of red hot charcoal are floating in the air. The heavens are rude and clear blue. Waves of heat turn the earth into a baking oven. Fields are chunks of dried and burnt bread. Trees are strips of roasted biltong. Cyclones pass through and carry away my ancestor's bones to faraway seas. Skeletal dunes of sand replace our mighty *Mamvuramachena* 'river of white waters'.

Hills are bald headed and wearing a herpes zoster belt around their bellies. They are sweating under the grip of heat caused eczema. I suppose we are cursed. *Nyami nyami* once warned of hunger, cyclones and heat waves, the menacing triplets.

Behold my earth is naked.

Dear beloved God are we cursed?

**THE PITKIN PRINCIPLE**  
**BY MARLIN BRESSI**

Bad breath. Bad breath and woodsmoke, thought the caseworker, finally placing the smell emanating from the tiny, bearded man sitting far enough away from the desk to make the letter in his hand undecipherable, but close enough to offend the senses.

"Tom," began the caseworker behind a steeple of fingers, "what is it that you want this time? I told you last week that you were ineligible for cash assistance."

Tom, whose matted, unkempt beard was forty-five even though the face it concealed was only thirty-three, scoffed and waved his hand dismissively. "That's right. You told me that I was too broke to be poor."

"I said no such thing!" the caseworker protested, then glanced uneasily at his watch as if he had someplace else to be and someone else to be with, even though he didn't. But Tom wasn't concerned with the pronunciation of words or the structures of sentences; he cared only about distilling the spirit of truth contained in those words and sentences.

"Your pay stubs indicate that you earned over six thousand dollars during the previous fiscal quarter," reiterated the caseworker, his eyes darting like Alcatraz spotlights over the application tucked into a manila folder containing the flotsam of Tom's shipwrecked life: Utility bills, bank statements, threats from collection agencies, an unhonored lease agreement, an unemployment compensation denial letter.

"I'm aware that you haven't worked since August, but, based upon our income guidelines, your prior earnings make you ineligible for cash assistance," the caseworker said. "If things don't improve, you can apply again in a few months." Tom began to open his mouth but the caseworker cut him off at the pass with a wag of his index finger. "Nobody told you to assault your co-worker, but you did it anyway, and now look at where it has gotten you. Why did you have to take matters into your own hands?"

True, Tom could have reported the theft to a supervisor, but a lifetime of bitter experience had shaped and honed his reactive instincts, telling him that he had no choice but to take matters into his own hands-- his were the only hands he trusted.

Tom, to the caseworker's surprise, did not protest. He had already argued his case to the arresting officer, and then to the magistrate. Like a one-hit wonder stuck on an endless reunion tour, he had grown tired of singing the same song, and the music had left his soul. And yet, despite his weariness, he would insist to the bitter end-- which, he felt, wasn't very far off-- that a fellow *ought* to be allowed to slug a sticky-fingered jerk who had the audacity to steal from another man's work locker. The magistrate, however, didn't share this particular point of view, and so he reserved a room at the county lock-up for the defendant, and expressed his belief that thirty days ought to be long enough to change Tom's perspective.

The problem with living paycheck to paycheck, Tom discovered, is that the loss on an entire month's income is directly proportional to the loss of one's entire estate; cars get towed away, locks on apartment doors get changed, credit lines get revoked. True, he could regain possession of the meager souvenirs that make up the wealth of a working man if only he could come up with the back rent and the fees for the impound lot, but, by the same equivalence, he could also earn a spot as starting pitcher for a World Series contender, if only he were ten years younger and knew how to throw a curveball. He had lost everything, except for the thinnest, most brittle shard of hope and the skinniest sliver



of human dignity-- and a few coins, which he withdrew from the pocket of his filthy trousers and slapped onto the caseworker's desk.

"Haughty-hate cents," he said to the caseworker. "That's all I got to my name. Tree quarters, tree dimes and a penny. Honest-a-god!" he declared, swearing an oath by way of holding up a callused palm, with rings of black filth outlining the circles where blisters used to be. "And yet I earned too much money *earlier* this year to be eligible for any help right *now*?"

"I'm sorry," said the caseworker, spreading his hands in a gesture of helplessness, "but that's just how the system operates."

"Then I'd say you need a whole new operating system," Tom chuffed. After a brief pause he stamped a dusty foot onto the neutral-colored carpet and stared vacantly at the neutral-colored walls, before turning his attention back to the neutral-colored caseworker.

"If I had a lucky break, just one, I could move up enough in the world to reach the level of poverty that qualifies me for some relief," he continued. "Then I wouldn't have to sleep in a dried-up crickbed under the old Pennsy bridge. Do you know what it's like to sleep in a dry crick with freight trains rumbling over your head? I suppose you'll tell me to go to a shelter. Go ahead. I'll wait right here until you convince someone at city hall to build one."

The caseworker continued to stare at Tom over his folded hands.

"This is a sleepy podunk village, chief," sighed the derelict. "A sleepy podunk county seat of a sleepy podunk county. On my walk over here I passed four blocks of houses, a flower shop, a boarded-up storefront, the bank, the courthouse, city hall and the county assistance office. No shelters. No soup kitchens. No food pantries. Why, I could even tell you the colors of all the houses in order. I ought to know, chief, because I roam these streets from sunrise to sunset."

"There's a shelter in Harrisburg," the caseworker suggested.

"Great!" chirped Tom sarcastically. "That's only about twenny miles away. Can I borrow your telephone? I'll just ring up Jeeves and tell him to bring my car around."

While Tom spoke, the caseworker's steepled fingers moved up to his cheeks, tugging, slowly dragging them down until his lips frowned clownishly and the red, soft flesh surrounding his eyeballs became visible. He glanced at his watch again, then began drumming an index finger against his cheek, tapping out the hollow rhythm of the extremely bored. "What can I tell you, Tom?" the caseworker sighed in frustration. "Like I told you before, we do offer several programs designed to get you back into the workforce."

Tom smiled, not to the caseworker, but to himself, the way a grandparent might smile when remembering something adorable that a grandchild had once said. "Do any of these programs come with a clean suit and a haircut?" Tom laughed so hard he had to brush away a tear. "What a great interview that would be, chief! I'd shake the hand of the hiring manager-- after I find a magical taxi with a driver who takes pebbles as fare, of course-- and then apologize for the stains on my trousers. 'Sorry, Mr. Manager, but you know how it is when nature's supermarket runs out of toilet paper,' I'd tell him. It's November and all the soft, green leaves are gone. Maybe in spring, when the crick hain't

bone dry and the greenery comes back, I can clean myself up respectable-like. And then I can take you up on one of them there *programs*."

"Must you be so vulgar?"

"The pain is right now and right here, chief. "

"Tom, if you would just be reasonable-- "

"I don't want a program! I want a goddamned sandwich. Or maybe a bowl of soup. You call yourself a caseworker and you can't even help a fella like me get a meal? Look, chief, it doesn't even have to be a hot meal. I'd settle for a can of beans."

The caseworker's quivering face reddened like a summer tomato and he wondered why he had ever decided on a career in social work. Why hadn't he taken his mother's advice and gone into real estate? Maybe there was a time when he felt that he could make a difference, but the drudgeries of the job had worn him down to a nub. The paperwork was endless, the bureaucracy a maddening, frustrating maze of nameless faces and faceless names.

*Deep breath now. Breathe in. Hold it. Deep breath out. Now smile. Big smile. B-I-G smile!*

"Mr. Yush-- Yushkevich, is it? I'm a very busy man with many important things to do. I am sorry that I was unable to help you today, but if there's anything I can do to assist you in the future, stop in and see me again. Will you do that? Wonderful! Now if you'll just-- "

Tom held up a single finger and the caseworker slowly reversed his momentum, lowering himself back onto the chair.

"Look, chief. The reason I came has nothing at all to do with cash assistance or job programs or food stamps," said Tom, and the glittering panic in the eyes behind the rust-colored beard informed the caseworker that something deeper, something darker, was on the derelict's mind. "But I really do need your help. You see, I need you to keep me from disappearing."

"Come again?" asked the caseworker, after a moment of uncomfortable silence, after the wave of mental indigestion subsided. Tom unfolded his letter and placed it onto the desk.

"My only friend left in the world these days is Billy Pitkin," explained Tom. "We lived under the Pennsy bridge together, me and that old man, or at least he did until yesterday. It's chilly out there, especially at night, and he came down with pneumonia. I woke up yesterday a little before sunrise and saw that he was just about ready to step onto heaven's welcome mat." The caseworker offered a sympathetic nod.

"So I scoop him up-- poor old man, he was as light as a bird-- and I carry him into the village and knock on the first door I see. Lady inside calls for an ambulance and while we're standing there waiting for them to come and take him to Good Sammy he takes this paper out of his coat pocket and hands it to me, see?" The caseworker palmed the letter and slid it toward himself in the surreptitious manner of a businessman entertaining a buyout offer.

"We did a lot of talking under the bridge, me and Billy, and he told me once about this theory he had, this strange, queer belief that people only exist-- on the material plane, that is-- as long as somebody else is thinking about them. If there should come a time

when nobody loves you, when nobody remembers you, when nobody cares, then *poof!* You're gone! Just like you never even existed at all."

Tom shook his head to answer a question that the caseworker had not asked. He explained that Billy Pitkin wasn't talking about death.

"Nothing as natural as that," he said. No, Billy saw withered husks and discarded chaff as the normal, ordinary, ultimate consequence of life. Death was the reward of a lifetime, a privilege granted to paupers and princes alike, but non-existence-- at least according to Billy Pitkin-- was the one fate worse than death.

The caseworker balled up a fist and pounded his forehead. "That is, without a doubt, the most absurd theory I have ever heard," he declared. Tom said that he had felt the same way at first, but the more Billy babbled about his peculiar belief, the less unreasonable it sounded. Over time, it almost seemed to make sense.

"What if he's right, chief? Billy Pitkin hain't dead yet, but there's no way he's going to make it through the night, not in the shape he was in when they came to take him away. And the moment his final breath passes beyond those cold, gray lips, I'm going to vanish just like a good little Christian on the day of the Rapture. Only I've got a hunch I hain't going to wind up in so nice a place, if you catch my drift."

"All because there will be no one left to remember you?" asked the caseworker with no small measure of skepticism. Tom nodded gravely and the caseworker's face smirked into a wry smile, like the smile of an office worker overhearing a funny joke on his way to the copy machine but is too afraid to laugh because he knows the joke was not his to hear. "I promise that I will not forget about you, Tom, if it will put your mind at ease. No, I am not just saying that. You have my word, Tom. As your caseworker, I will do everything in my power to make sure that you don't disappear." He eyeballed his watch once again.

"It's after five, can I please go home now?"

Tom smiled weakly, swallowed strongly, then nodded.

The derelict's letter was still on the caseworker's desk in the morning. He had not only forgotten to dispose of it, but he hadn't even bothered to read it, and since the note was filling the role of a coaster beneath the caseworker's steaming coffee mug quite nicely, he decided that its newfound purpose was infinitely more useful than its intended purpose. The note, and the man who had delivered it, remained comfortably out of mind until the caseworker took a taxpayer-funded respite from sifting through memos, returning phone calls and drinking coffee in order to clock out for his afternoon coffee break, which he celebrated with a glass of iced tea and the morning paper.

After perusing headlines and help wanted ads he flipped the crinkled page and came to the hospital admissions, birth announcements and other items of local interest-- which the caseworker seldom found interesting-- although a name did happen to catch his attention. William Pitkin had died late last night from complications related to pneumonia at Good Samaritan Hospital. He gulped the rest of his coffee and, as if to pay his last respects to a man he had never known, finally read the letter.

*To Whom It May Concern,*

*Should you happen to find an empty suit of clothing lying in the woods one day, or a set of footprints that end abruptly, do not suffer the expense or effort of trying to find me; for I*

have gone away to an unreachable place, and, to save you the trouble, I shall explain my shuffling away from this mortal coil.

"Speak of the devil and he shall appear." This is a common expression among folks of my generation, although I reckon not many people are aware that there must be a corollary to this ancient adage. If it is true that the devil appears when his name is spoken, then it stands to reason that the opposite must be true as well-- stop speaking of the devil, and he will go away.

I may not have much book learning in the way of science, but I do recall that a fellow named Newton once passed a law declaring that every action must have an equal and opposite reaction. These words, which I picked up somewhere along the way in my youth, are words that I have pondered throughout my long, tiresome existence, and these ponderings culminated in what I like to call (for lack of a better term, lest you accuse me of vanity), "Pitkin's Principle of Existence".

First, let us ponder the supposed miracle of childbirth. Many cultures believe that life sort of recycles itself, and some have argued that when one person dies another is born, at that very instant, to take its place. If birth is the equal and opposite reaction to death, what then is the equal and opposite reaction to conception? As I have said, I am not a learned fellow with a fancy calligraphied parchment, but I would wager that the opposite of coming into existence is the going out of existence, and I maintain that going out of existence-- not to be confused with death, which is an entirely different thing that is beautiful in its own way-- is not only possible, but rather commonplace.

Let us now ponder the matter of missing persons. I read up on this subject one night during that period when I was bedding down at the public library with Smoky Joe, before the librarian got wise and gave us the boot. Smoky Joe, being a fan of Agatha Christie, had set up his bedroll in the mystery section, while I hunkered down in the reference book aisle, and it was two days before we were discovered. I think that if it hadn't been for that kid doing research for a science project we might have been able to live there for a month.

Anyway, during my library stay, I learned that around 750,000 people go missing each year, to the tune of nearly 90,000 on any given day. Most of these missing persons are eventually found, either dead or alive, but many-- around 2,000 or so each year-- are never seen again. Oddly, many of these vanishings take place on public lands and in National Parks. Alaska, in particular, has an unusually high number of disappearances in proportion to its population.

Considering the number of folks who take to the great outdoors each year-- even up in Alaska-- it makes no sense that no traces of the missing are ever found. Given normal circumstances, a glove or a shoe should wash ashore, a skull or a thighbone or some other remnant ought to be discovered beneath a pile of rocks or brush. This detail has caught the attention of many free thinkers who have put forth the theory that these unexplained vanishings may have been the result of alien abductions. My theory, on the other hand, is far more plausible.

I maintain that people only exist because other people know of their existence, for much the same reason that you only notice hunger or pain when you think about it. Engage yourself

*in something interesting and these things go away. They only return when you run out of other things to do, and that's when you start noticing them again.*

*Now, it may seem like a stretch to believe that your existence is based on the premise that someone out there in this vast universe is paying mind to you at this very moment, but once you see things from a mathematical perspective, it begins to make sense. As of this writing, my age is 77 years and six months and, by my count, I encounter on a daily basis three people whom I've never met before. By multiplying that number by the number of days in a year (accounting for the occasional leap year), I come up with just under 85,000. In other words, even a bum like me has had the opportunity to cross paths with a lot of people in the course of my lifetime.*

*I, William Clement Pitkin, being of sounder mind than body these days, declare that the reason you continue to draw breath is because somewhere in the world, whether you realize it or not, there is somebody who is either thinking about you, talking about you, or caring about you! Just as love between a man and a woman ushers into this world the existence of a new life, the absence of love detracts existence from this material plane.*

*I have first-hand proof that this is so because, in the course of my lonesome travels I have known a good many folks-- of the variety many of you would call tramps-- who up and fell off the face of the earth for no logical reason save for the absence of love. There was Buddy Sampson and Charlie Nine-Toes, and Maggie Stewart and Juan Navarro and Smoky Joe, as well as others whose names I can no longer recall. One day they were here, illuminated by the glow of the campfires we built on the dry creekbed, laughing, huddling together for warmth and singing songs about happier times, and then one day I looked for them and they were nowhere to be found. Where else could they have gone? I miss them now something terrible, but now it's too late! Maybe I was looking for wood to burn that day, or digging up glass bottles to recycle, or doing something else that preoccupied my mind and caused me to stop thinking about them. But the moment I stopped thinking about my pals, they all up and vanished like my youth, and they ain't never coming back again.*

*Like I said, if I should someday vanish from this plane of existence, now you will know the reason why. It's all a matter of simple science, really, if you stop and think about it long enough, as I have done.*

*Yours very truly,*

*William Clement Pitkin*

The poignancy of the dead man's letter awakened in the caseworker a feeling of purpose and urgency that he had not felt since the day he graduated with a bachelor's degree in social work. With a sudden gasp of alarm he remembered Tom, and the caseworker wondered what his reaction would be once Tom learned that his only friend had succumbed to his illness. Obviously the man's foothold on sanity was shaky to begin with, and a blow like that could push him over the precipice. And how many blows can the human spirit, with all of its frailties and weak spots and hidden cracks, withstand? A broken bone could take months to heal, but a broken spirit may take years, if it can ever really be mended at all.

A psychiatric evaluation, thought the caseworker, is what Mr. Yushkevich needs. Income guidelines and mathematical formulas might have caused Tom to fall through the cracks

of society like a wispy paper doll, but the one thing the caseworker could approve without consulting a column of numbers and statistics was a recommendation for institutionalization. The stack of yellow forms, grown even more yellow due to the fact that they were rarely utilized, were in the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet. He withdrew a form and began to write that it was his official opinion that Thomas Yushkevich, current place of residence unknown, might pose a danger to the safety and well-being of himself and others.

The caseworker had just signed his name to the document and was reaching across the desk for a rubber stamp when he noticed that his hand was no longer there. And the disappearance of his hand was so inconceivable, so fantastic, that he was helpless to avert his eyes; it was like passing the scene of a terrible accident on the highway. He tried to account for it, tried to comprehend it, but it was all happening too fast; his forearm dematerialized next, then his feet were gone and the calves and thighs disappeared and then the caseworker could see no more of himself because there was nothing left of him to see.

## **CHAINED**

**BY BUWASO IBRAHIM RAZACK**

I feel baffled by the fact that I am from the breeding site of so called poor, censored —  
the left over dumping site,  
As you call it.  
It all comes to my illusions like dreams  
My plate like food  
Enslaves my heart and soul like a caged helpless baby.  
So all you said to put me down, has strengthened me to fight you.  
Everyday, this dumping site loses a soul out of your pride  
A black mother, a sister, a child, a would-be me, an entrepreneur, most of all:

A nation's servant dies.  
Wake up and look at the story on the other side of me...  
We could be equal if you weren't greedy and a self-proclaimed God.  
Once I cut these chains loose,  
You won't want to see what you've turned me into:  
A heartless, hungry, pathetic, worrier who won't spare you even a single moment.  
In exile, I write this letter, talking to my shadows, grasping on my breaths,  
Cutting loose my mind and its thoughts  
In this room I sit, suffocated, cutting sweat with my hands, feeding on unstable meals,  
walking all over with hoodies just for my rights.  
You have triggered and pitched more than hate out of my caged mind —  
You denied me school, medical facilities, infrastructure — most of all freedom of  
speech,

What else do you want to deny me?  
You have built more prisons than schools and educated your offspring in developed countries,  
Why not leave them in your Empire, so-called little heaven?  
Cut me loose and see my capacity,  
He that is stung by a bee fears a mere fly,  
The riddle says.  
We are dying a slow death, because you have fed us on sweet poison  
What an era to live in!  
Grips of my soul are faded and worn out  
You have pushed me to the East, West, South, North —  
And now to the wall.  
Where else do you want to push me?  
Only a fool wouldn't understand that a graveyard  
Is my final home,  
If not rooting in jail cells.  
My great granny once told me only a silly fly  
follows a dead body to the grave.  
Remember Grandma's words.

**A DIFFERENT KIND OF HOME  
BY MARGARET LEDUC**

On Christmas Eve Day 2015, McLaren Lapeer Regional Hospital discharges me to the care of my parents. I am not well—but behavioral health hospital stays in the United States in this era of the closing of long-term mental health facilities are three to five days on average, two weeks at most. From early November to Christmas Eve, I cycled through Metro Detroit hospitals, staying short periods at each, until, at Royal Oak Beaumont, I began to refuse medication. At that point, I was transferred by ambulance to McLaren Lapeer, the only hospital in the area that allows medication to be administered without a patient's consent.

By sheer luck, my psychiatrist and her husband have attending privileges at McLaren Lapeer. Dr. Linsk, my psychiatrist's husband, immediately took me off one medication, which he believed was contributing to the mania and about which my psychiatrist had tried in vain to warn doctors at other hospitals. He prescribed injections of the antipsychotic Invega. Slowly, over time, it would take effect, dispersing the delusions and restoring me to sanity.

On Christmas Eve, my parents, my twin brother Matt and I attend services at Messiah Church of Detroit, my childhood church. The candlelit service, the hymns, even "Silent Night," the choir singing angelic arias, cannot rein my madly galloping brain. As I sing the words to "Silent Night," I can feel my skin crawl.

I am convinced I am about to burst from the chrysalis, a new creation. At Havenwyck Hospital, in early November, I dreamed of my dead grandmother, and she called me by a different name: “Magid.”

My roommate spoke French—or told me she did.

“Teach me how to say, ‘My grandmother is dead. I am sad,’” I begged her, sitting cross-legged on the cot opposite, leaning forward, desperate.

Marie, fat, with greasy brown hair, curled on her own cot, her pale, unshaven legs pulled up and into her body, clad in a blue-and-white polka-dot hospital gown.

“Sure, I can do that.” She grinned.

“You’re nothin’ but a mess-cat, Marie,” said Amber, the dark-skinned, brass-curved mental health tech with a laugh, as she did rounds with her blood pressure cuff riding her hip. Marie sniggered. “Yeah, that’s me. A mess-cat messin’.”

Later, I cried so hard that a nurse told me she was going to give me a sedative. I hyperventilated as she pushed the needle into my vein—there was something bad in this bite.

As I drifted into sleep, icy silver waters threatened to engulf me. I heard my grandmother’s voice.

“Jump, Magid!”

I leaped, leaped clear of the deadly silver liquid before it could touch me.

“Grand-mère!” I called.

But there was no answer.

I woke to the hard mattress, the thin sheets, the multiple locked doors between me and freedom.

But I was triumphant: I will not die—I will live.

I lay awake on the cot with this knowledge welling up inside me. There was something inside me nothing can touch. My grandmother was protecting me.

I pondered the name she gave me in my dream: “Magid.” Always, family members had called me “Meggie,” “Meg,” or “Margaret.”

What was this “Magid?” Isn’t that—Isn’t that—a man’s name?

Was it just my imagination, or are my muscles becoming more defined? My voice deepening?

Now, at Christmas Eve service, I hold my true identity within me like a talisman: Magid, French prince. Grandson to a queen. Ballet dancer extraordinaire. Spy.

Matt leans over the pew and smiles at me gently. I give him a big grin. Soon, I will be free. Soon, I will join a CIA training center, so my legendary career can begin.

Needless to say, I’m not safe to come home to stay. My parents search for a solution. My psychiatrist refers us to Aviva Mental Health Services. Aviva, she tells us, delivers residential services to people with severe mental illnesses from its center in the Metro Detroit suburb of Southfield and from an array of group homes. Aviva is a community-based solution for people who need long-term care outside the acute, emergency care of a hospital. Many of its residents live there permanently, three or four to a house, supervised by a house manager and staff. The only way I qualify for Aviva—the only way my parents can pay for it—is by drawing upon the Social Security Disability I was granted in



2010. Terminated when I married in 2019, the Medicare that was a piece of my Social Security paid for all of my lengthy hospitalizations, as well as for Aviva—everything but the ambulance rides—and essentially prevented my parents from being bankrupted.

I have no choice in the move to Aviva: My parents have gone to court and sought guardianship. As I realize later, the guardianship would be my saving grace. Without it, my parents would have been unable to compel me to take my medication, unable to compel me to stay at Aviva. Aviva would keep me safe, keep me from becoming homeless and exploited—or dead—while I shook off the delusions, the injections of Invega beginning to slowly take effect.

But in the moment, I can appreciate none of this. The instant I glimpse Tiffany, my new house manager, with her trim, military, no-nonsense build, I am convinced: Aviva is a cover. And I will be tested by it.

At the end of December, my mom moves me with some clothes, a few books, and my Kindle, to Kauffman House, a nondescript, two-story 1950s brick home on a cul-de-sac in Southfield.

“It’s going to be O.K., Meggie,” she reassures me, as she closes the door to the room that would be mine, leaving me sobbing on the bed, blankets covering my face. “I love you.” Tiffany stands beside me, methodically tabulating my belongings for her records. I don’t respond to my mom. I don’t believe her this time. I feel hopeless and helpless, as if what little I have left were being taken. Normalcy is being ripped from me—even though I am not capable of leading an ordinary, healthy life at this time. I have no idea how long I will be at Aviva—for life? Some people did indeed spend their entire lives there.

That first night, in the pink-and-black tiled bathroom, as I struggle to take out my contacts, my eyes burn. Someone switched my contact solution, I am convinced. I am trapped.

Enraged, I pick up the solution bottle and throw it at the mirror.

“Goddamn fuckers! You can’t poison me!” I shriek. “Fuck you all!”

Again and again, I hurl the bottle at the glass, screaming obscenities. I don’t know what is happening to me. I don’t recognize myself—I never act like this. But it feels so good.

Fury, righteous fury, pumps through my blood. I am done with being tricked and coerced and locked up. I will break free.

“Motherfuckers! I am not crazy! You can’t do this to me!”

Courtney, the nighttime aide, rushes to the doorway.

“You’ve gotta calm down right now, Miss Meg! If you keep this up, I’ll call the police.”

That stops me. My dad is a judge. I know the stories—of mentally ill people warehoused in jail. Of my dad’s powerlessness, even with his authority, to get mentally ill defendants proper treatment—often to do anything but send them back to jail when they appear before him for bond hearings.

More than anything, I don’t want to spend the night behind bars. Better to be locked up, safe, in a group home.

I quiet. I begin to cry.

I retreat to my plain, nondescript bedroom—virtually nothing distinguishing it as mine—curl into a ball under the covers and weep.

“I am not crazy,” I repeat softly to myself. “I am not crazy.”

I fall asleep to overwhelming grief—and wake at 4 a.m. to the sound of Dereka mopping the floors outside my bedroom door.

Shift change.

I have been institutionalized.

Yet Aviva is a kinder institution than I first anticipate. Its mission inspired by Jewish values, many of its residents and employees are Jewish. And so, the Friday evening after I arrive, as snowflakes whirl down in the dusk, I find myself invited to light the Shabbat candles. The rabbi—a very young man with a scruffy brown beard, in yarmulke and black clothes—bows his head and recites a Hebrew prayer as he stands before the glowing white flames that I gingerly light in the basement of Aviva Center.

“We are welcoming the Shabbat Queen,” someone whispers to me.

I bend my head, too. I pray that my disastrously capsized world will right itself, offering my Christian prayer up with the Hebrew prayer. Maybe the Shabbat Queen is Mary, Mother of God, and she will intercede for me with her Son. In my confused brain, Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic ideas meld until I am not sure what I believe anymore—all I knew is that I need help from a power greater than myself.

*Help me, Holy Mother, you who stood at the foot of the cross and watched your Son die. You who know what it is to lose everything.*

As I raise my head to glance around the room, Lia, my housemate, flashes me a toothy grin.

“Now, we recite *kiddush*, Meg!” She jams a piece of paper, filled with Hebrew letters and, below them, an English translation, into my hands. I can tell Lia relishes walking a newcomer through these rituals. Everybody around me smiles, the way people beam over a baby toddling and falling.

*For you chose us, and sanctified us, out of all nations, and with love and intent You invested us with your Holy Sabbath.*

I am invested with Shabbat tonight, part of this nation of the ragtag mentally ill, both chosen and saved. Lia, with her effervescent grin and her crown of wild, thatched black curls, her goddess heft most likely derived from an antipsychotic, fills the role of the Beloved Queen—her welcoming me, instead of the other way around.

I am something special—the Shabbat Queen says so.

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As December gives way to January, January to February, the delusions recede, but I become deeply depressed. I begin to despair: Will I ever leave Aviva?

Everyday life at Kauffman House is rote and slow. At 7 a.m., Courtney wakes us. Pulling myself from the arms of dreams, I stumble into jeans and a sweatshirt, head straight for the coffee pot in the kitchen.

Tiffany stands at the stove, frying eggs and bacon.

“Easy there on the coffee, Miss Meg,” she said. “One cup. Can’t have you bouncing off walls.”

There is no danger of that. I feel as if I am wearing cement shoes—the effect of the Invega.

“I want bacon!” Lia screams, her mouth agape, her eyes saucers. She starts to blubber—and drool. “I hate this stupid diet! You can’t make me eat this food!”

“Just eat,” Jill says, having come in from her three morning cigarettes, her lank brown hair falling around her face as she wolfs bacon. Two words.

Tiffany puts her hands on her hips and stares down Lia.

“Now, Miss Lia! Your mother wants you to be on that diet. Try that avocado. It’s good food.”

Lia cries so hard she begins to hyperventilate. She shrieks, “It’s slimy and gross! You can’t make me eat it!”

I retreat upstairs, but not before I hear Tiffany say, “Now, do I need to give you a Trazadone this morning?”

At the stroke of 9 o’clock, as we do most mornings, we leave and drive to Aviva Center for lunch, Lia riding shotgun, Jill and I in back. White minivans carting residents from other houses like Kauffman House, pull in and out of the center, a long, low, brown brick building on 12 Mile in Southfield. Outside the entrance, even in the cold, residents huddle, smoking. They range in age from early twenties to seventies and eighties, using walkers and canes.

“Hi, Lia!” a woman calls.

“Vernie!” Lia yells. “I haven’t seen you in, like, two days!”

A tall, good-looking, dark-skinned man walking into the center waves at me. “Hey, there, Meg.”

“Hey, Antoine.”

For an instant, the cement shoes vanish. I float into the center on wings.

Monique, golden-skinned, heart-faced, with a megawatt smile, reigns downstairs in the kitchen. Today, she is leading a gaggle of residents in making tuna salad sandwiches for sixty.

She catches sight of me. “Meg, you’re here! Just in time! Christine over here needs help dicing celery.”

Helping prepare the simple daily lunches, supervised by always-upbeat Monique, forms one of the few bright spots of my routine at Aviva. In the kitchen, chopping, stirring, washing pots and pans, I am happy and work hard. And Monique trusts me—my mom’s lessons in how to make my way around a kitchen coming in handy.

Christine, a tiny, dark-haired girl, no more than twenty, looks bewildered, the chef’s knife dangling from her hand.

“Dice? What does that mean?”

“It just means to chop into little pieces,” I say, rescuing the knife. “Here, let me do one stalk, and then you can try.”

I glance up. Antoine is leaning in, stealing a piece of celery, smile dazzling. Monique swats at his hand.

“There’ll be time to bother Meg after lunch! She’s busy right now.”

Antoine just grins—then turns and saunters away.

I pause in the midst of dicing celery to watch that tall, retreating back.

“You be careful, Meg,” Monique says, scooping up the celery I finish dicing and adding it to the bowl of mayonnaise and tuna fish in front of her. “That Antoine is a heart stealer.” I return to helping Christine dice celery. At lunch, I look for Antoine. But he is gone—and with him, it seems, the chance at romance. Am I supposed to just forget that I am a young woman aching to fall in love? Is that what crazy women do?

After lunch, Monique and a few residents move tables, so a space opens in the center of the basement floor. She designates Robert, a twenty-something year-old resident, to be our “house D.J.,” a role Robert relishes.

Then Monique starts rousting residents from tables: “It’s time to move!

Some are enthusiastic; some need encouragement. Many are torpid, over-medicated. But Monique won’t take “no” for an answer. Soon enough, she has us in two lines on either side of the open space, and Robert is busting out tunes.

“Play ‘I Wanna Dance with Somebody,’” Kristen requests.

“Only if you dance!” Monique says.

Kristen, a chubby, blonde woman, groans, then laughs. She accepts the challenge.

Taking a few tentative steps down the line of residents, she twirls with a huge grin on her face. Everyone claps in time. When she gets to the end, we applaud.

“Meg, you’re next!” Monique calls.

“Play Pharell’s ‘Happy!’” I sing out. Entering the line, I stutter-step, rock my hips, and spin, clapping my hands to the beat.

*Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof.*

The afternoons are slower. Usually, we return from the center to Kauffman House, and I spend the time, alone, in bed, crying, ticking away the hours to dinnertime as I listen to the noise of the TV blaring downstairs. I may be living in a house that had some sense of normalcy, but the doors are locked and there are alarms. As time passed, and I recovered, Aviva’s clinical director encouraged me to start volunteering for a local autism advocacy nonprofit, doing simple work of filing and sorting paperwork every morning. But the afternoons remain empty, wastelands in which I became deeply depressed. I wonder if I will ever get my life back. I wonder if I will ever be like other people again.

More and more, as the months passed, the answer seemed to be, “No.”

But some afternoons, we run errands supervised by Tiffany—like today, picking up Ari from the hospital in the ancient white minivan. I have never seen Ari. Although technically he is a resident here, he has been hospitalized ever since I arrived at Kauffman House. Early this morning, I overheard Tiffany talking to Courtney in the hallway outside my room.

“Ari isn’t doing too good,” she said. “I think they’ve messed his meds up.”

“Shit,” Courtney responded. “Why are they discharging him?”

“Insurance. And you know these doctors. Always ready to discharge.”

I heard the swish-swuck of Courtney wringing out the mop.

“That boy is going to be one hot mess,” she said.

“He’s going to be scared is what he’s going to be.”

This afternoon, we are tooling east on 12 Mile, watching nail salons and Qwik Lube joints flick by. Lia commandeers shotgun beside Tiffany, as she always does. She de-

mands to choose the music, so that she can sing along—Michael Jackson is her favorite pop star to karaoke.

Jill and I sit in back, Jill clutching her purse so that she can scuttle out to buy cigarettes when Tiffany steers into the 7-Eleven parking lot. Jill stinks of stale smoke with a sweet undertow of raspberry-banana—her lip balm, which she keeps smearing on, over and over.

As we merge onto southbound I-75, Lia grabs my wrist.

“Who-a-a-a, Meg!” she exclaims. “Is that a Fossil watch? I totally love Fossil!”

Tiffany frowns into the rearview mirror, the warm brown of her face creasing. “No touching, Miss Lia! Keep your hands to yourself!”

“No touching” is one of the many rules of living at Kauffman House. To this directive relates another rule: “No dating.” Another, cardinal rule is “Take your meds.” The choice is between obeying this tenet and being hospitalized.

“Oh, sorry,” Lia mumbles. Then she brightens. “Did that watch cost a lot of money?”

“I don’t know,” I say. I consider. “My uncle gave it to me for eighth grade graduation. I’ve had it for a long time.”

The watch with its simple silver face reminds me of the girl I once was, so full of dreams and potential. It also tells me that I am treasured, that that healthy young woman is remembered and cherished, that loved ones are cheering for her to return, the mature version of herself. I wear the watch as a talisman.

Tiffany smiles.

“That was very nice of your uncle,” she says. “You have a nice family, Meg.”

I know I am fortunate—as Tiffany reminds me, I am fortunate in my family. But I don’t *feel* fortunate, like I should be grateful. Instead, I feel as if I have somehow offended God.

The rhythm of “Beat It” vibrates through the speakers.

“Yaaaaassss!” Lia screams.

“Easy there, Miss Lia! Other people have to put up with your hollering.”

Lia ignores Tiffany. She pipes up as confidently as a rooster crowing dawn in the land of the midnight sun: “Showin’ how funky and how strong is your fight... Just beat it! Beat it!”

The minivan pulses.

“C’mon, Meg! Sing!” Lia pleads. “Puh-lease!”

The lyrics throb along my palms’ heartline, as I sing along: “No one wants to be defeated... Just beat it!”

Tiffany turns the radio down, ignoring Lia’s protests.

“It’s getting too loud in here. Can’t hear myself think.”

Tiffany doesn’t like freeway driving.

Finally, we get there. After parking in front of a hospital I don’t recognize, Tiffany leads us upstairs to the lobby of the behavioral health unit. About twenty minutes later, Ari appears, dressed in green hospital scrubs—a tall, rangy, twenty-something year-old boy surmounted by a shock of wild blonde hair and a bushy red beard. He stinks. He can’t stop pacing, swinging his arms. He is grinding his teeth.

“Ari, are you all right? Didn’t they give you a shower in here?” Tiffany asks.

He says nothing, just grinds his teeth harder.

Tiffany jams on the bell. A mental health tech appears.

“I can’t take him like this!”

“He gets discharged today. Doctor’s orders.” The mental health tech glances over at Ari, who has paced to the far end of the room, then back at Tiffany. “Sorry, ma’am. You don’t have much of a choice. He gets discharged today.”

Back in the car, Tiffany is on her cell, talking to a superior at Aviva Center. “He’s in no shape to be discharged. But if we don’t take him, they would discharge him to the streets.”

In the backseat, Ari groans. Then he bangs his head, hard, against the back of Tiffany’s seat.

Lia screams.

“I gotta go.”

Shoving her phone into the console, Tiffany speaks soothingly. “Stay with me, guy. Can you do that? Just breathe.”

Ari takes a gulp of air. Then another. He rocks.

“We’ll be home soon, Ari. Breathe.”

The rest of us are very quiet, willing Ari into calm on the ride back to Kauffman House north on the freeway. Lia cries. Jill gnaws on her thumbnail. I pray beneath my breath, a mantra, the words Jesus spoke to the troubled waves: *Peace, be still. Peace, be still.*

“Stay with me, guy,” Tiffany says. “It’s gonna be OK. We’re almost home.”

Ari groans again—a low, guttural sound, from his belly. I can smell Ari’s sweat, his fear, the rank odor of his unwashed body. I can almost taste it on my tongue.

Ari gasps. And gasps again.

“Breathe slower, guy,” Tiffany says. “Breathe in, one, two, three... Now out, one, two, three, four...”

As we exit the freeway onto surface, tension leaves my body. We are close to Kauffman House now. We are going to make it, Tiffany counting a cadence as Ari inhales and exhales.

*Peace, be still. Peace, be still.*

As we roll along 12 Mile, it is as if I am speaking these words over all of us in the white minivan. I am speaking these words over myself, too—a benediction, a sending for this journey that I am on.

*Peace, be still.*

I will Ari, Jill and Lia’s minds into peace, wholeness. I will my own mind into wholeness.

Maybe, someday, we can all leave Kauffman House. Maybe, someday, we can all walk under blue skies without being watched.

Next year in Jerusalem, as they say.

But this place, at this time, is our only refuge.

We turn the final corner.

“We’re home,” Tiffany says.

---

That evening, as Tiffany makes us dinner, Lia asks, “Is Ari going to be O.K.?”  
For once, Lia is not complaining about her diet—we are all on our best behavior.  
“Of course, Lia,” Tiffany replies. “The doctor is going to see him first thing tomorrow.  
Right now, he’s sleeping.”  
She dishes up spaghetti with a side of meatballs for Jill and me.  
“Maybe he would like something to eat,” I suggest. “Maybe I could take him something.”

“Maybe later,” Tiffany says, placing a plate in front of me. “That’s thoughtful of you,  
Meg.”  
“We’re worried,” Jill says, her face forlorn. That has to be the biggest word I have ever  
heard her say.

There’s a pause.  
“How could they have gotten his meds so messed up, Tiffany?” I finally ask. I haven’t  
touched my food yet.  
Tiffany speaks matter-of-factly, but also kindly: “Doctors make mistakes. We all make  
mistakes.”  
Tears—slow, real tears—trickle down Lia’s face. There are tears in Jill’s eyes, too. It is as  
if they are grieving.  
*Doctors make mistakes.*  
But I, I do not cry.  
Ari is safe—safe here with us now, safe here at Kauffman House. And, a little later, I will  
bring him something to eat.

**ONE SKY, ONE EARTH.**  
**BY AMBILY OMANAKUTTAN**

The land is not just earth.  
But one ploughed into existence.  
As one removes each layer  
Sweat, dreams and streams will flow.  
Wherever the war is  
Our heart walls are hurt.  
Whichever field is burning  
Yours or your neighbour's,  
It is life that starves.  
It is the earth's womb that turns barren.  
When can we ever build a dream

that all can see together..?  
When can we all join in one prayer  
Under the same tree...?  
As birds fly beyond borders,  
I dream of a nationality  
Where I am not a foreigner,  
A dream of a singular Nationality

**ELEGY ON JUNE 24**

**BY UMA MENON**

(IHRAF Youth Fellow)

*for Oscar and Valeria Martínez, who drowned while crossing the Mexican border.*

A precious ladybug,  
red pants & black shoes –  
this delicate girl  
with her wings sweeping  
over her father's back.  
Bodies floating  
& terror sinking,  
just a month short  
of two & a breath short  
of peace.

The earth watches  
the floating clouds, one  
with the summer sun.  
Desert sands come  
bringing the news,  
as the noise  
lightly dies away.  
The border slowly  
swims away, drowning  
in its own sin.

Monday's Coastal Report  
has arrived: reeds, fear,  
empty beer bottles,  
water-logged hope,  
two immigrants face down  
praying for peace.



**MURDER WHICH WAY**  
**BY CHINONYEREM CHINWENDU**

I've cried out blood for my country,  
pointing my hands towards the mother's house,  
calling my people to come for an aid like a team dog,  
jumping from bush to house, trying to save the hilarious man.

-

The man has pushed iron door towards the East,  
rotating and revolving the inch towards the mantle,  
shooting the antelope from afar,  
chasting the heart of an ape from the lion's mane.

-

Murder which way!  
is it from the East, West, North or South?  
is it from the air, water, or land?

**CHASING BUTTERFLIES IN THE DAYS OF WAR**  
**BY MUHAMMAD NASRULLAH KHAN**

Victory bonfires blazed on the India-Pakistan border.

###

Kumla, a ten-year-old autistic boy, squatted in the corner of a refugee camp building, gnawing on a rock hard hunk of bread. His eyes squeezed shut with every bite, the sharp crust made his gums bleed. It was all he had to eat. He no longer remembered the taste of his favorite foods.

The camp had been Kumla's home for almost a year. He wore a red stone around his neck, loosely tied with a leather cord. His father gave him the stone as a good luck charm before going off to war. Little balls of grime formed on the smooth surface as he patted it.

His parents had named him Sahir, but everyone called him Kumla, which meant silly, and it stuck because of his quirks. His big blue eyes always darted back and forth. A long shirt did little to hide his malnourished body. Dandruff and dirt clung to his hair. Frizz exploded all over his head. That entire shaggy halo gave him a wild and feral look. "Why don't you play with the other children?" his mother suggested. Her long hair, shining with oil, fell across her dark eyes as she pulled out her sewing supplies from the small plastic tub that held their meager belongings. Kumla shook his head and pinched the stone. He imagined a graceful butterfly flapping its way toward the sky, dancing in the rising sun. He loved the vivid colors of budding flowers, butterflies, birds, and bees. Once, a butterfly landed as soft as a breeze on the tip of his nose. That precious moment

ended when it fluttered away too soon, and he scratched at the spot. He yearned for the experience again.

In the village where Kumla lived before he was a refugee, the officials believed he was unable to learn, so they barred him from school. He didn't mind because the beauty of flying colors taught him how to go on with life. He roamed the expanse of his small village, enjoying the petal soft flight of multicolored wings near the giant oak tree in its center. Rocks of different shades surrounded the tree, and Kumla enjoyed jumping from one to another.

Now, in the gloomy camp, Kumla missed the sunlight, fresh air, and butterflies. He didn't understand why he couldn't still have them.

With these thoughts floating in his mind, Kumla slipped past his mother, who sat repairing his socks to venture outside. He had not gone far when he glimpsed a small boy sitting cross-legged on the uneven grey floor of the alley. The boy bounced a ball against the opposite wall. Kumla stopped to speak, but voices in the alleyway distracted him.

In the passage leading to the barracks, Kumla saw two guards with guns hanging from their shoulders. Kumla crept to within earshot. The potbellied guard tapped a cigarette against the wall. "God bless those who are fighting our enemies. Kashmir will become part of Pakistan or remain independent, but we will never be part of India."

The other sentry rubbed his big mustache and nodded. "It's like my father used to say: 'Live free or die.'"

Kumla knew about the hatred between India and Pakistan, the cause of the fires and destruction, but he couldn't understand why they killed his butterflies.

"Butterflies shouldn't have to die in war," he said to the men.

The two guards turned, unslinging their weapons, then lowered again when they saw it was Kumla.

"Butterflies?" The potbellied guard scoffed. "The whole land's turned black, and you're worried about butterflies?"

"They will return," Kumla pointed to unseen fields. "The snow covers them in winter, but they return in summer."

"Go back to your mother, kid."

"But my butterflies..." Kumla raised his hand. "Out there."

"Your father is there taking care of your butterflies." The potbellied guard said with a smile that held no warmth.

Kumla pictured his father. How could someone who loved animals fight and hurt people?

"Will Father ever come back?"

"Yeah, with all your precious butterflies."

Kumla looked into his eyes, unblinking. "Yes, he is good at catching them."

He turned to go, cursing the day of coming to the camp. His mother had dragged him out of bed, saying they were going on vacation. "It's a nice place," she'd said, hustling to pack their clothes. Kumla pictured a happy place where colorful insects of all shapes and sizes flew. Instead, they'd come to this place that was little better than a mass grave.

That seemed like a lifetime ago. Now, his mother always worked, even on holidays, mending others' clothes all day. Here the food tasted as stale as the air, and there was too little of both.

Kumla played mostly with younger kids, because older ones made fun of him. He had few friends because he was different.

Through holes in the grimy wall, he looked out at the open sky and sun. Rubbing his lucky stone, he imagined running and playing with the kids in the village.

That night, he fell asleep thinking of his village. He dreamed of his father playing with giant and delicate butterflies. Their opal, gold, and purple wings, floated in the sweet blow of spring.

"Please bring these to me," Kumla begged his father in the dream.

"How many?" His father smiled.

"Billions!"

His father clapped and butterflies appeared, some bigger than flamingos. The sky darkened as countless butterflies obscured the moon, the planets, and even the Milky Way. Kumla choked, waking up in the musty air. The rust-colored stone walls jarred his senses. He closed his eyes to prevent his tears from staining the fleeting images of his wonderful dream. His fancied butterflies dipped in and out of flowers and flapped away. The colors disappeared, and the pastures turned black.

The dream gone, he came fully awake and ran to his mother. He sobbed and pleaded, trying to persuade his mother to take him home.

"This is our home now." She stroked his hair. "We are safe here."

"But I miss my butterflies, Ma," Kumla begged, and wiped his stone with the hem of his shirt.

"We've got to live here a little longer, Sahir. This place isn't so bad, is it?"

"I want to go home where all my butterflies are—"

"Your butterflies have also flown somewhere that's safe." Her face grew distant, as she too wished for their lost home.

"At our home?"

Kumla's mom cleared her throat and took a deep breath. "They're not there now. There's a war."

Kumla wiped black gum from his stone. "With bombs?"

"Yes, but I don't think they killed your butterflies. They've flown to new fields, full of bright and colorful flowers."

Kumla dragged the stone across his thigh. "Why is there war, Ma?"

She sighed. "When men become mad, they get guns and start killing one another."

"Why?"

His mother's eyes narrowed. She lined up the thread, pursed her lips, and moistened the end. Squinting, she slid it toward the needle and pushed it through then turned to look at him. Her wicker stool groaned in protest.

"Ma, they..."

"I have a headache, Sahir."

Kumla took a jug from the smooth concrete and poured dingy liquid into a tin cup.

"Here, Ma." He frowned, spilling a few drops. "When will this war end?"

"Only God knows, my son."

"You told me God created everything in this world."

"Yes, He did."

"Even butterflies?"

"Everything."

"But butterflies don't make wars! They love flowers. Men destroy flowers and kill butterflies. Why doesn't God come down to stop the men? You told me He is all-powerful."

"He will. He will." His mother gripped his shoulders and held him close. "When all this is over, we will go home. I promise."

"Will Dad be there?" His voice muffled in the folds of his mother's shirt.

She bit her lip, gently pushed him away and returned to her sewing, despair clouding her face.

When the war had begun, and sirens wailed, God called his Dad to go away to save the butterflies. Kumla boasted about it to all the children in the camp.

That night, Kumla lay in bed and rubbed his stone. His mind roved, caught up in dreams about all that he would do when he escaped. He remembered talk of a man's escape and knew it was possible. But the guards with their sleek and black guns were always watching.

Kumla awoke before dawn wishing to catch the sun as it rose. He crept to the guard station, something he had done many times before, and crouched below the counter. His tiny fingers gripped the edge, and he lifted himself to see the man on duty sleeping.

Kumla didn't hesitate, but darted past the guard toward the glorious outside.

"I will catch the sunrise and chase the butterflies," Kumla whispered in excitement, clutching his stone.

He ran, eager to see his fields again, but the surrounding land seemed alien. On the horizon, black clouds wound their way into the sky. Where once there were fields, only ash remained. Uprooted trees lay splintered across the ravaged land. Big steel machines lay smoking and ruined, tipped onto their sides. Everywhere pieces of clothing lay in tatters.

Kumla's eyes widened. His modest village should have been in the valley below, but it was nowhere. Where had it gone? He picked his way through scorched debris and earth, trudging into the night, until he stopped fifty feet short of the remains of a tree. He could barely recognize the thing which had inspired so many of his favorite winged creatures. The broken tree, stripped bare of foliage, standing less than half the height of the one from his dreams was dead. All but the thickest branches toward the bottom of its trunk had been ripped away.

Kumla circled the once-majestic tree. Something crunched under his sneaker, stabbing through the worn sole of his shoe. Yanking his foot up, Kumla's eyes flooded with tears. The jagged corner of a pale, red rock poked through blackened soil. Multi-colored stones encircled it.

Summer's here, but where are the butterflies?

Kumla hid his face in his hands. It was all gone —the fields, the butterflies, the beauty. Barren lands, endless dust and blackened earth stretched to the horizon. The world had changed. Death, not the sun, rose in the sky.

“The sun is dead! The sun is dead!” he cried. No birds flew away at the sound of his voice; no butterflies flitted.

Kumla’s eyes located the spot where his house once stood. He climbed over the debris looking for some reminder.

After long, strenuous minutes of digging, Kumla climbed out of the rubble and fell to the ground. He raised his fingers to rub the lucky stone, but it wasn’t there.

“Dad!” He groaned into the dirt, frantically trying to find the stone

A shadow flew above him, blocking what little light there was in the sky. It looked to Kumla like a giant butterfly.

“They have grown big now, like in my dream.”

He waved his arms, coaxing it nearer. Its brilliant red and yellow colors streaked fast against the black sky. Then he saw it was not a butterfly.

"Mama!" he screamed.

#### **WHEN THE HOST IS IMPATIENT**

**BY TABASSUM TAHMINA SHAGUFTA HUSSEIN**

*(IHRAF International Fellow 2020)*

We have fled from our homeland.

Our men were killed,

Children slaughtered,

Boys mutilated,

Houses torched.

Villages after villages burned.

We took the shelter,

In our neighbor country, our Host country.

Different soil, earth, people.

They were Kind.

They brought queens and celebrities.

To let the world, know what have been done to us.

Camera flashes and clicks.

Queens and celebrities assured us, we will be back,

To our motherland.

Time passes,

NGO people come and go.

They give us food and shelter.

Time passes,

We can’t wait any longer.

How does it feel to be the object of pity?

How does it feel to be dependent on the Host country?  
Without Rights.  
Without refugee status.  
We tried to get out of boundaries,  
The boundaries created by the Host country.  
That separates us from the Host country people  
We tried to go to unknown land,  
To get away from our Host country.  
Desperate.  
We did not want to be burden on them.  
Many of us are rotting in jail in different countries.  
Some unknown people come and give us money,  
Tell us to do things for their politics.  
We don't understand their politics.  
Why should we? We are just shelter seekers.  
But we do things, the things they tell us to do  
without knowing for whom, why or for what.  
We just need money.  
We need to save money because when we will go back to our homeland,  
We will be needing the money.  
They are gracious, Feeding 11 million people.  
How can one live in someone's land for a long time?  
Some Host country peoples take our women with the hope of giving job;  
Those women never to be seen again.  
They have been trafficked to unknown lands to be slaves.  
Who knows what?  
Local drug dealers using our boys,  
The list of injustice is long.  
The Host says how long can they feed us.  
Kindness is vanishing slowly like a puff of smoke,  
Its been more than two years.  
We organized a program to tell the Host and our country that we want to go back.  
NGO people gave us white shirts, posters, mobile sets for the program.  
Now, our Host is annoyed.  
Outrageous! How these beggars wearing neat and clean clothes congregate and ask for  
demand?  
Says the people from Host country.  
Why you blame us?  
Our resettlement failed again and again.  
Our demand is to go back to our own country.  
If our safety is ensured by the Host and the world.  
The Host and the world blame each other.  
The Host says the world is not concerned.

The world says the Host failed in diplomacy.  
We don't know diplomacy.  
Our Host wants to move us in an island, Bhashanchar.  
Surrounded by fences.  
The "Host's" smiles are disappearing,  
They are irritated.  
Their eyes say as if  
They want to push us out of their land.  
We are stateless people.  
Now, our Host is impatient.  
Without our Host, we are helpless and hopeless.  
When our Host is impatient where we will go?  
Nobody wants us.  
Our own country kicked us away.  
Neither the Host country nor any other country in the world,  
Want us.  
Our Host country, listen to us,  
We don't want to stay.  
We just want ensured safety after our return to our homeland.  
Show us the same kindness when we first came.  
We know we are just like fishes to you.  
Which get stale soon.  
Now we smell like stale fish to you.  
Dear Host, don't be impatient,  
Please don't give up hope on us,  
Please don't be impatient,  
Be patient.

**WHO AM I?  
BY JOHN KRIEG**

As I was walking through the New Hampshire woods with my cousin, a man that I grew up with and very much admire, the conversation we were having fell upon the Patriot Act and the activities of the National Security Agency (NSA). I expressed outrage at how, in my opinion, both were infringements upon the First Amendment to our Constitution and upon *my* personal rights as a citizen supposedly protected by said Constitution. Surprisingly, to me at least, my cousin was not in agreement with my stance, and even added the self-cleansing (for him at least) statement that, "I have nothing to hide." *Oh man*, I thought, *do I ever wish that I could say that*. In truth, I have plenty to hide, or at least plenty that I wouldn't want to become public knowledge, which I will only scratch the surface of here. Things such as how I treated women in my younger years, how I treated employees, how I looked upon older people, and the length of time it took me to

evolve on the issues of sexual equality and race relations. In other words, although most definitely considered a flaming liberal by today's standards, that wasn't always the case.

There were some occasions during my evolution when I could well have broken my arm patting myself on my back by taking some stances either mentally or physically of which I was proud. During my second year in college when one of my very best friends, and top campus player, told me that his dream job would be, "To be a philosophy professor at an all girl's school. Let's see what we can do about that failing grade Susie." I knew where he was going with it and did feel it was wrong, although I didn't have the guts to express my opinion for fear of being viewed as un-cool. Or, during my mid-thirties when I was dating a girl who was smoking hot, and who all my friends stated was way out of my league, and towards whom I actually entertained the thought of marriage before we had a conversation concerning the emerging AIDs crisis. She, being a devout Christian, knocked me back on my heels when she stated that, "The homosexuals deserve this. It's God's way of cleansing the human race." I was shocked, and replied that, "Nobody deserves this. It's horrible that anyone has to suffer like this." She immediately excused herself from my presence, and I never saw her again. Or, when a young black man who I had taken in and tried to see through a college education, became angry with me because I put him on notice that he was taking advantage of my generosity and also growing more disrespectful by the day. I merely pointed out that he could make a more concerted effort towards helping out around the place. Enraged he screamed, "All you do is give me a place to live. I'm not your slave!" I could see that he was goading me towards making a racist rebuttal but I didn't fall for it. I calmly explained that through life's journey that he would come to discover that someone giving you a place to live was in fact a very big favor, and all I wanted was the small favor of some heartfelt appreciation validated by some actual effort in return. Upon my request that he leave, in a huff, he moved out, but not without punching a hole in his bedroom door. Today, I'm sickened by the Mad King's views towards Mexicans because all the Mexicans I hired during the years that I had my ill-fated construction business were extremely hard workers and loyal almost to a fault if they were treated right, and by treated right I mean that I never forgot that they were men. Their sense of machismo is inherent within their culture, and not to respect that fact is a big mistake.

My personal evolution, however, was a slow and plodding circuitous route, and lately, I've been searching for the reasons why. Psychologist endlessly tell us that the first five years of a child's life are the most important ones and shape what they will eventually become during their adult years. I believe this to be true and must admit that mine were so tumultuous because of daemon alcohol consumption on the part of my parents that I have no memories of these years. Recently I became enlightened by Marianne Williamson's marvelously liberal book entitled: *A Politics of Love: A Handbook for a New American Revolution* (2019) in which she writes:

*And when children can't learn to read by eight years old, the chances of them graduating from high school are greatly reduced and the chances of incarceration are increased (p. 135).*



I only mention this because I had trouble reading up until I was eight years old, even being put back to repeat my first grade year. I struggled behind my classmates for a few more years before finally catching up and I believe that compromised my self-confidence to say nothing of my self-image. That Williamson was dismissed by comedians as “that little hippy chick,” repulses me because, out of all the democratic candidates, to me, she was the one who made the most sense. Now, as of January 2020, she is out of the presidential race, and peace and love is once again being written off as something that died at the close of the first Woodstock Festival. So say I, anyhow. The fact remains that my intellectual development during my early life was most likely marred by trauma, but I won’t use that as an excuse for my lagging evolution because I believe that no matter what circumstances we are dealt in life, that at minimum, we are expected to rise above them.

I am inherently rebellious, especially towards authority, and what I despise the most are those in authority that abuse their power simply because they can. By my early thirties, I realized this penchant to fight the power was hurting me in the world of business and that a softer gentler approach could well benefit me economically. This caused me to enter the Dale Carnegie “How to Win Friends and Influence People” course three times, once as a student and twice as a graduate assistant, and I do believe that it helped me immensely. The most useful thing I learned was that most people were so busy worrying about their own problems that they wouldn’t spend much time worrying about me as a problem causer, unless of course, I gave them a reason to. In other words, there was no conspiracy against me, and assertions made about me during my earlier years that I was my own worst enemy were mostly true. During my Carnegie period I happened upon a book written by humanist Sydney J. Harris entitled: *Winners and Losers* (1973) and it has become something of a survival guide for me through the years. Harris died in 1986, and the book has fallen out of print, but it is always within my reach at home and I still refer to it often, although I have to admit that it frequently casts me to the “loser” side of the fence and I frequently feel convicted by Harris’s little gems accompanied by a humorous cartoon drawing. Out of 54, I’ll borrow three that are especially important to me:

***A winner***

*respects those  
who are superior to him,  
and tries to learn  
something from them;*

***a loser***

*resents those  
who are superior to him,  
and tries to find  
chinks in their armor (p. 31).*

***A winner***

*knows that people  
will be kind*

*if you give them the chance;  
a loser  
feels that people  
will be unkind  
if you give them the chance (p. 43).*

*A winner  
seeks for the goodness  
in a bad man,  
and works with that part of him;*

*a loser  
looks for the badness  
in a good man  
and therefore finds it hard  
to work with anyone (p. 79).*

It bothers me to no end that, at age 68, that I still don't know who I really am, and that if I don't know by now that the odds are good that I never will. I see the writing on the wall. I know the time allotted for me to evolve is winding down. I get it. I'm the one incessantly writing that we need to seek to be comfortable in our own skins. So why do memories of things that I have done, and now wish that I hadn't, make my skin crawl? I hung on until I hit age 65 so as to take advantage of my Medicare benefits. Be careful of what you wait for because I quickly found out that I have Type II diabetes, heart failure, teeth rotting out of my jaws, and a prostate as large as an orange. Nothing, however, beats me up more than I beat myself up again. I'm willing to continue to weather the beating because I now have a reason to. My five-year-old step-granddaughter is the light and the love of my life and I obsess daily about what kind of an example of humanity I present to her. She's living here at home with us due to the crystal meth addiction of her parents, which I resent, but try mightily not to let her become aware of, because I know from experience that a child will always wonder about how their life may have been different if only their parents would have been different. We only get one of each, and to denigrate them in her presence would be petty and small and would never serve to make her a well-rounded person. It would, in fact, contribute to severely damaging her self-confidence and self-image. I'm just not down with that. So in deference to, but also as an offering of redemption to the behavior of my own parents, I'm determined to have a positive impact on her life. I want to put a good and morally well-adjusted person out into society, and the only problem with that quest is that I might not live long enough to actually do it. But, as for today, *I am alive*, and the task is to do the best I can for her. So be it.

Sleep is elusive these days. The ghosts of my past stand at my bedside looking down upon me more in withering disgust and condescending pity than in any form of respect or admiration. I toss and turn as my dream life scrolls my shortcomings, failures, and contemptible traits before my disbelieving eyes. The jury is still out as I awake with an electric jolt, look skyward, and ask, "Who am I?"

## **DOUBLE SHIFT**

**BY ZACH MURPHY**

Heavy eyelids don't adhere to will after you've just worked a double shift.

Zamir was having that problem on a particularly snowy night, so he pulled over to the side of a lonely road and threw the car into Park.

Holiday season was a drag. Zamir worked the frontlines during the massive influx of rabid shoppers pushing and shoving each other like football players diving for a fumbled ball, except the fumbled ball was an item that they could probably order online for the same cost and less hassle. And then there were the customers who were extremely rude to him at the cash register. They'd snap their fingers, roll their eyes, and talk condescendingly to him as if he didn't understand English. Assholes transcend all language barriers, anyway.

As the snow continued to fall, Zamir drifted off into a deep sleep, only to be awakened by an aggressive knock on his window. He shook from a combination of his nerves and the freezing cold while frantically gathering himself, as he'd been lost in the kind of slumber that you wake up from and you can't tell if it's been a couple of minutes or a couple of hours.

Zamir cracked open the window with hesitation. The blowing flakes greeted his skin like a breathtaking slap to the face. A deep and raspy voice cut through the white, windy noise. "You need some help?" the person asked.

Zamir rubbed his eyes and mumbled, "I'm not drunk. I'm just tired."

The person came into focus. It was a man with a puffy winter coat. His dark beard was speckled with snow and gray hairs. Zamir was somehow more relieved that it was a random stranger and not a police officer.

"This ain't no way to spend Christmas Eve," the man said.

"This is no way to spend any evening, but here I am," Zamir answered.

"Tell me about it," the man said. "I've been taking care of these roads non-stop for as long as I can remember. I'm DeWayne, by the way."

Zamir glanced at the rearview mirror. Behind him was a big truck with a plow attached to the front. "I'm Zamir," he said.

DeWayne peered ahead of Zamir's car. "You're stuck," he said.

"I know," Zamir replied. "I've been searching for a new job for the past two years and I'm having zero success. Even my degree doesn't make a difference."

"No," DeWayne said. "I mean your car is stuck."

Zamir shifted the car into Drive and tried to advance forward, but the wheels spun in place. "Oh shit," he uttered.

"I'll be right back," DeWayne said as he trudged back to his truck and grabbed a pair of shovels.

DeWayne and Zamir shoveled the snow away from the car, hoisting the heavy white stuff around like a pair of mighty worker ants moving mounds of dirt. “Try it now,” DeWayne said.

Zamir hopped back into his car. He shifted it into Drive and gave it some gas. The tires trounced over the snow. “Thank you!” he graciously yelled, holding a thumbs-up out the window.

“Have a great night!” DeWayne shouted back.

During the long ride back to his apartment, Zamir thought about DeWayne, and how the man was some sort of guardian angel. A guardian angel who reeked of cigarettes and under-appreciated duty. Zamir was looking forward to eating leftover Thai food at home with his cats Mookie and Sudoku. He needed to fuel up and get some rest, because for the next double shift he’d have to deal with Returns.

**PULITZER PRIZE PIG  
BY JESSICA MEHTA**

Pulitzer Prize Pig spoke of what it means  
to be \*\*\*\*\* as a \*\*\*\*\* man with a look  
the look      *that* look  
women were born knowing  
how to read. I knew  
that look      *the* look  
at fifteen when the AP teacher crouched  
beside my desk in the dark  
while flashes of syphilis  
and gonorrhea shuddered  
across the projector screen. (Still, even now,  
I hear the tired clicking of the tapes).  
I knew the look,      saw *a* look,  
at eleven when grown men whistled  
at my unfolding hips and high  
school boys rolled Corollas  
along middle school parking lots  
with eyes that spider-scurried  
pressed breasts. And I knew, I saw  
that look,      *his* look  
at four. In the bathtub, I learned shame—  
I shot my father  
in the eye with a plastic alligator squirt  
gun and never bathed with open doors again.  
Pulitzer Prize Pig sidled up close, nosed for nipple  
drinkers and sniffed out my slop. Trough walls

are low, but sticky, slick beside stys,  
and boars are happy with scraps.

## **TESSELLATED WOMAN** **BY GRACE SUGE**

A sylphlike woman appears at the girls rescue center, resplendent in her tessellated brilliant red shuka, her overstretched earlobes adorning several multicolored ornamental earrings, a rainbow of collar necklaces cascading beautifully from her long neck, beaded bracelets overcrowding her arms, a beautiful belt hugging her svelte body, her plastic sandals and bald beaded head sweating profusely, a quintessential native female she was. And as usual, demure, in rhapsodic silence and misting eyes, she stands at the gates waiting for her rescue. Her sparkling splendor was running away from a mad man. That was I one year ago. My name is Soila; I am 18 years old and a mother of two. I gave birth to the children but tradition says they are not mine.

I come from a small, isolated and preservative village deep in the jungle. My father was a polygamous man; he had 5 wives and a total of 38 children. I am the only child to my mother. My father had several hundred head of cattle; a wealthy man by local standards as cattle was the epitome of our livelihoods and the numerous children were the pride of a male. I never went past the third grade in school because that was the final class our primary school could offer. We had three ‘teachers’ who were school dropouts. Naisula and Leyian, two of the teachers, dropped out of school when the local morans-warriors got them pregnant and they had no choice but to look for a way to survive on the one liter of milk each child gave them every week as school fees. They were not a good example to emulate but so far they were the best-educated champions in the village. When they told us to thunderously yell like a hornbill,

*“I wek in de mooning, I prush my teet, I take a cup o tee, and I ran to skul,”* I thought something didn’t sound right, it sounded more of my mother tongue than the queens’ language, sort of gibberish, but what did I know? We might forgive children who sent seismic ripples which caused underground tectonic plates to dislocate with their thunderous recitals but it is a mortal sin to obfuscate while on it, the earth might harbor a permanent grudge on them.

Our classes were held under trees with clanging cowbells always disrupting our A, B, C, D recitals. When Teacher Naisula motioned to the grazing cattle, taught us that a group of them is called a *“gang of cattle”* and continue breathing as if nothing happened, I thought I saw a cow shake its head disapprovingly with its eyes closed and it inadvertently gored the cow in front of it causing a commotion, they ran all over the “school” as we took to our heels running in the direction of our homes, our sweaty plastic shoes getting off of our small feet as they tried to race us home. Those whose feet abhorred any kind of shoes ran on sharp thorns, burying them on earth as if they never grew on the soil on which they had been rested in peace. Those very feet were used to trampling on hot embers to put the fire out on our 3 stone firewood stoves when water was scarce.

Classes ended prematurely that day in our unregistered school where desultory education was rampant.

Our school logo was, "wisdom to all." This was written on a board and nailed to a tree. By day, the tree hosted our school and when darkness fell it hosted Koila, the loquacious village mad man who lived in his parallel universe under wisdom to all. Dressed in tatters evoking a dismantled appearance, we practiced our vilest taunts on him as his guttural incoherent shouts became our trigger for village marathons. If not for our childhood innocence I bet we would never have seen the gates of heaven with our own eyes, *carpe diem*. But we grow up, don't we? The innocence we took advantage of now becomes our folly. One day Koila disappeared from the village, where to, only God knew. Maybe we harassed him to death. Someone mentioned that he had been taken to a rehabilitation center in town for treatment. If he got healed, he might come back as the school head teacher of the children currently wallowing in arrested development. Everything was possible in our village. Whatever the case, the village became dull for us, the swaggering miniature bullies.

\*

My childhood was happy though. I used to go out and graze my fathers' cattle in the vast savannah grasslands after helping my mother in house chores. This I did until my mother woke me up one day, she tapped my shoulders and I thought it was too early to start milking our cows, it was still dark outside. Without any warning, she went out and fetched a bucket of water that she had left outside the previous night. I had been curious the night before of why she left the water there. My adolescent youth mind always liked to live in adorable vanity and this carefree existence would be my undoing later. She then took me by hand behind our loaf like mud walled and dung smeared hut, instructed me to remove my blue wraparound garment and she poured the now cold night frozen water on me. She particularly concentrated on my woman parts. She told me to wash thoroughly and when I protested, she with an admonitory gesture instructed me to keep quiet. Then my body became icily cold. A sheep's hide was then wrapped around me. She commanded me to follow her, my teeth chattering as she led me to a newly built hut in the furthest corner of the village. When I entered the hut I came face to face with a nervous Lanoi, my best friend who sat at the center. Two other girls were also seated pensively looking at the doors' direction. Outside the door stood an elderly woman I had never seen in the village. I planned to ask Lanoi what was going on, she was always affably accommodating especially to my blazing stupidity. Before I hit puberty, it was my atrophied belief that kidneys manufacture babies which are then released when mature enough. When I had shared this wisdom nugget with Lanoi, *"Hoping their characteristic inarticulate lisplings would not distort what they mean, kindly go ask teacher Naisula and Leyian why their kidneys released babies too early."* she retorted, her face plastered in an ambiguous grimace.

She later found it prudent to introduce me to her Moran brother who became my boyfriend. Every day, when it was getting dark and it was time to take the cattle back home, our boyfriends used to wait for us in the savannah grasslands. When I saw my Moran, resplendent in his warrior attire which partially covered his debilitating features,

balancing his lithe frame on one leg, a spear, on one hand, I was always smitten into ice as my heart appeared to abdicate its duties, thunderously beating like a drum. You will always find me looking down shyly, my hands behind my back as I drew on the soil the outline of this fine Moran who was rubbing gentle blandishments on my rustling fancies as I feigned reluctance. The tumult in my heart was always brought to a screeching halt by my mothers' frantic calls,

*"Soila! Soila! How many times have I called you?"*

One day, I took too long to return with the cattle and my father; an expert hunter in his younger days tracked my footprints and Morans' enticing odors that led straight to Morans' hut. The next thing I knew I was dangling upside down a tree like a bat not out of my renowned childlike ingenuousness and gymnastic agility but out of my father's seething wrath. He claimed I was an amorous youth indulging in wayward fancy...Yes, I was flummoxed too.

Me: *"Lanoi, who is that strange woman I found outside?"* I whispered in her ears.

Lanoi: *"The cutter"*

Me: *"Of what?"*

Lanoi: (looking askance) *"Of human parts."*

Me: *"Which ones?"*

Lanoi: *"What! You amaze me with your innocence. She is the traditional girl circumciser Soila!"* She shouted

Me: *"I wasn't informed about it. Why wasn't I asked first?"*

Lanoi: *"and who told you that you had a choice?"*

Me: *"was it because father found me in Morans' hut?"*

Lanoi: *"it is a rite of passage."*

Our tradition dictates that every member should always be welcoming to visitors, but beware; such a visitor can come in the form of a village circumciser. Seemed the circumcision plans had been meticulously hatched a while back .If I was clairvoyant of what was to take place later, I would have run away in the night. I am leery of elderly women who carry knives around. Now shocked into silence, I waited. After a few minutes, one of the other girls was called outside. I came to learn later that the two were siblings. The elder sister stood up and walked briskly as she was met at the door by her mother. After about 20 minutes, she was brought back, a cowhide bedding was made for her and she lay down without as much as a whimper to show that she had been cut. Seemed it was not a painful exercise after all. Next was my friend Lanoi, she went outside and after another 20 minutes, she came back as another bedding was prepared for her. Then went the younger sister and I took this opportunity to move closer to my friend as I inquired in a quavering voice,

*"How was it Lanoi? Was it painful?"*

Silence!

No response was forthcoming. As I looked down, I saw a stream of blood flowing from beneath her to the cowhide sheet. Before I could react I heard a thin shrill voice like the wail of an expiring mouse. It came from outside, the hairs on my neck stood up in alarm and I involuntarily released a scream that surpassed the one from the girl being cut. She

was brought back, her sobs smothered as my mother came for me cowering at a corner. With an icily cold hand and a grip as clammy as death, she dragged me outside. She is a very strong lady; I was no match for her. She wrestled me down on a cowhide sheet as she gripped both my hands above my head. The circumciser was holding a bloody crude knife at my feet. I tried to wiggle out of mothers' grip without much success as the circumciser called for reinforcement from the other elderly women around her. Both my legs were held apart, then the woman pulled at one of my inner flesh the way she pulls less than appealing outer layers of animal meat, and bluntly cut and cut until she reached that hood on top of the bud that contained all the amatory effusions I could think off. Then she pulled at the other flesh and bluntly cut and cut until she reached that bud again. I thought it was over, until she strongly pulled at the bud with all the two dangling pieces of flesh hanging at either side of it and cut and cut, the bud seemed stronger than the rest as it tried to resist this woman's madness, it slid from side to side dodging the knife until it got tired. When its courage wavered, it stood still as it was finally severed without any kind of anesthetic. Feeling suffocated and as pain, unlike any, I had ever felt cut through me I screamed in terror as blood shot from my body and plastered the circumcisers' face. My mother in a surly tone- seemed my screams infuriated her, rebuked my cowardice while informing me that this was a rite of passage, that she too went through it and that it signified a transition from childhood to adulthood. How cutting off my feelings became an important exercise worth celebrating was beyond my comprehension. It was a rite of passage alright but I had a right to pass out too so I allowed myself that time out from this terrifying ordeal. I did not struggle with all the hands that held me down anymore. A cloak of cowardice hanging on my neck, I shamed my family and the entire village. I was nobody's role model. My sorrow persisted as I saw Lanoi nearly bleed to death and when she came out of seclusion; she was no longer the same. She suffered from acute depression for a long time as a result of the trauma. After a period of recuperation, I came out, caked cow dung and milk fat as my plaster and pain killer, never to return to my fathers' house. That was the end of my education, I was an adult now. At 13 years of age, I was betrothed to an elderly barren woman in exchange for two cows as my bride price. The arrangement was that I will live in this woman's homestead which she shared with her husband, four of her co-wives and twenty-five children, have babies with the husband and these babies would be hers, not mine. My small brain couldn't understand how this polygamous thing worked out but I had no choice, I had to cohabit with a man decades and decades older than me in fact we were nearly a century old, most of the years were his.

The liaison between me and the old man was strange too. Haggard and weathered by age, He lacked the vigor of a Moran when it came to the daunting task of mating with a teenager. The act became exclusively a child conceiving exercise. There were no good feelings whatsoever, no heavenly ecstasies in its purest form, and no ripples upon ripples of erotic tension cursing in my body to bring me to the precipice. It was like waiting for sunrise that never shone. The lack of feelings thereof was not out of my unwillingness to be regaled by old man's random hyper moments after recalibration, but out of a lack of erogenous zones that enabled them. The nerve endings in which the ripples could course



through had been severed and the flesh left on top of a stone to wiggle by itself as it dried under the sweltering heat. The mating exercise was henceforth punctuated by ripples upon ripples of pain, not something I looked forward to. The only erotic feelings that remained were in my memory, the acts of my feral Moran in response to my rheumy and pleading eyes which could make Semeiyan's husband froth at the mouth.

So from this mating act, I got pregnant aged 14 years and since there were no hospitals nearby, I gave birth at home, Semeiyan "my husband" being my birth assistant. We were both unfamiliar with the birthing process, so when Semeiyan saw my sons' feet dangling outside my body, she got hold of them tightly, then pulled and pulled until the baby came out, skinless feet, stillborn, and giving my young body a tear from here to Timbuktu .

The next two pregnancies were even harder on my immature body but luckily the children came out alive. As a result, I lived with a fistula for years, the urine, stool leakage, infections and all, the pungency, was quite on the nose, my own included.

Semeiyan's husband whiled away the hours seated on his three-legged stool, always, puffing away smoke from his tobacco filled pipe as he watched the sun rise and set in retirement while I was running around taking care of the kids and house chores. When he slept too, he dozed away into a deathly sleep in a comatose state as if he was hosting compunctious visitings by his ancestors, ancient garb covering their cadaverous appearance as they were calling him out for living beyond his expiry date. Early last year, as he was seated outside in his enigmatical silence, watching birds as they perched on trees, the sun became too hot for comfort and he still sat there. I was afraid to beseech him to go rest in the hut lest he pronounces a somnolent curse that he may not remember.

Maybe he was measuring the severity of weather patterns to come up with interpretations that will be wisely shared with his wives around the fire in his nightly sage reflections. When the sun set and he had not moved from his superannuated slumber, I instructed Samparuan our son to go wake him up,

"Father! Father!" he called out as he shook his father. When there was no response Samparuan came running to me,

"Father is still staring at the trees," That's how the one I would call my baby daddy in today's lingo kicked the bucket. His descent to death was through old age, they say.

One day as I was busy ruminating over what became of my life; I spotted an elderly visitor who wore some bizarre apparel supported by a walking stick in our homestead. His anomalous appearance seemed familiar to me but I could not immediately place where I saw him. So Semeiyan came to my hut, instructed me to prepare lunch for the visitor, take a thorough bath and wear my best colorful garments. I did so, served the food and retreated to the kitchen. After having the meal; she called me to her hut for a talk. I went as ordered and sat on the earthen floor.

Semeiyan: *This is Koila, my brother.*

Me: *Welcome to our home.*

I bowed in front of the visitor in greetings and he touched my head as he blessed me. He seemed to be about the age of Semeiyan's husband.

Semeiyan: *As you well know, I lost my husband a few months ago. This homestead has been a bit lonely for lack of a male figure. He was our pillar of strength and our protector.*

Me: *May his soul rest in peace.*

Semeiyan: *Staying like this will expose us to so many hazards. To ensure my lineage grows and safely so, I have decided that Koila will take my husband's place in your life. You will sire more children for me and he will stay with you in your hut as your inheritor."*

I looked down, not knowing what to feel. Why do strange matrimonial arrangements happen to me? I then went to my hut to feed my young children. My friend Lanoi had died while giving birth to her first child. I miss her a lot. I loved her candor nature; there was nobody else I could confide in. I mused gloomily as I picked some dried cow dung I had collected earlier for my cooking. As I was breaking the dung into small combustible pieces, I remembered how as young children we used to scoop wet cow dung and throw it at the village mad man as we squealed in uncontrollable delight. He did not bother to wipe the excrement off; He walked while the dung drizzled away as he cursed us. This memory saddened me, then suddenly like a thunderbolt the voice hit and my mind froze. "Soila," I heard this familiar voice calling at the door. Although I had not heard it for years, the voice was tattered, incoherent and dismantled, it belonged to a madman I used to know, the one who lived below the wisdom to all. Shocked to my bones, I jumped up as if I was a child again and flew out the door knocking down Koila-the former village mad man as I headed to the vast savannah. I ran beneath the cold glare of the desolate night, I navigated the wild thorns that pricked my flesh; I meandered through all the mad landscape that pricked my life. I ran and I ran without looking back. When I was far enough, I lay down below a tree for the night. Overwhelmed by melancholy thoughts, I cried my tears off. After all that I had gone through in my young life, why would anyone have the audacity to bring the village mad man, rehabilitated or not to inherit me? That's a line I would not allow any mortal to cross. Though the irony of this scenario made me laugh through my tears; wasn't this the same man we used to taunt in our childhood? We thought he would come back as the school head teacher but he had out maneuvered what we thought of him by coming back as a respected male adult who could easily procreate with Soila, Semeiyan's wife. My tradition allowed this arrangement as well as allowing men of the same age set to share their wives. A male of the same age set with Semeiyan's husband could easily visit our homestead, plant his spear squarely outside my hut to signify his presence, then confidently leave very early the next morning while coughing loudly to signify his exit. Thankfully for me, most of Semeiyan's husband's age set were deceased and those who breathed could not stand up from their three-legged stools, because of their arthritis.

I had heard of a girls rescue center in town that might provide the education opportunity that would help me find my voice. I wanted to break the chain that tethered me to our traditions, the chains that made me dance like a marionette in a circus and chart my own course. So I planned when tomorrow comes I will wake up and follow my own sunrise, the rays led me here.

**A TRIP TO THE MOUNTAIN  
BY LAILA HALABY**

It had rained quite a bit in the last few days so there was not much traffic as they headed to the top of the mountain that Monday afternoon listening to an R and B station on their satellite service.

Maise had spent her day off uprooting the settlers: clover and stray grasses that had planted themselves uninvited into the rich soil of her tiny garden. The need to go to the mountain had come upon her suddenly. One minute she was on her knees with her gloved hands digging and pulling and the next she was rushing into the house with a frantic desperation. She had found her husband seated in the tiny room that he called the library. He was staring out the window with an open book on his lap and his hand resting on the pages.

“Let’s go to the mountain and see if there are any butterflies,” Maise had said.

Daoud had nodded but said nothing. He had slipped a paper marker into his book and they had both gone about making the preparations necessary for this excursion. From start to finish a trip to the mountain occupied between three and five hours of the day. She went to the kitchen and put together a bag of light snacks while he went to the closet and pulled out their rain jackets, hiking shoes, and the butterfly net.

Fifteen years earlier their only son Basil had been killed in a car accident while driving home from college to visit them. It had been a senseless accident that was the result of several factors, none of which had to do with him: a blown tire, inattention, wind, rain, debris in the roadway. A four-car accident. Basil was the only one who had died. According to the DPS officers, it appeared he had done nothing wrong. “Wrong place, wrong time. Bad luck. Bad timing. Senseless tragedy. I am so sorry for your loss.”

Life had not been an easy place for either Maise or Daoud, nor had it been unduly generous, but until Basil was killed, it had been quietly happy. When they had lived together as a family, even after Basil had left for school, their days had skipped along as though they had been on an always-vacation of the soul, but now the mundane and sad minutes passed in excruciatingly slow motion. The intervening decade and a half had aged them both in different ways. For Maise it had slowed her every movement, which on the outside gave her an air of peacefulness but on the inside created ruts in her soul and her organs. For Daoud it had infused everything in a profound sadness, a heaviness that at times was too much for him to lift. The lightness they had known as a family had been lost. The joy he used to feel at the simplest things had been erased.

As a small boy, Basil had been fascinated by butterflies and they often landed on him even if he was in a group of people. It wasn’t just butterflies – bugs generally gravitated toward him – but butterflies delighted him. When he got older and was still taken by the beauty and lightness of butterflies and their apparent affection for him, he had told them he wanted to be a lepidopterist. Neither had heard this word before. “What if our son becomes a profession we cannot even pronounce?” Maise would say, giggling.

Once they had completed the initial ascent and loop of the mountain road they lost reception and the car was silent save for the woosh of driving and the rustling of trees in the wind and other cars heading in the opposite direction. Several times during the drive Daoud leaned over and put his hand on Maise's leg. She responded by wrapping her hand around his.

Forty-five minutes from home, they pulled left into the ranger station parking lot. Daoud went inside to buy a day pass – this was the second year since Basil's death that they had not bought the annual pass -- and Maise went to the restroom. Neither said anything getting out of the car nor getting back in again.

Daoud pulled out of the parking lot and surged up the road. They had not been driving a minute when lights flashed to the left up ahead. A white SUV was parked on the side of the road. A large hand reached out the window and gestured to the pullout on the right side. Daoud pulled over.

"What is happening?" Maise asked.

"I am getting a speeding ticket."

"Were you speeding? I didn't notice it."

"I just looked and we were going forty-two. The speed limit is thirty-five."

Daoud rolled the windows down and turned off the engine. Maise had already opened the glove compartment and handed him the registration. Daoud pulled his wallet out of his pocket and removed his driver's license and insurance card. He held both documents in his left hand and waited for the officer who was just getting out of his truck and lumbering toward them.

The officer was a thick, heavy-set man of average height. Everything about him was thick and puffy. *Heavy-blooded*, Daoud thought as the man leaned down and looked in the car.

Daoud handed him his paperwork and the sheriff took it, glanced down, and then looked back at him.

"Do you know why I pulled you over Mr. Hassan?"

"I was going over the speed limit."

"Yes you were Mr. Hassan. Do you know what the speed limit is here?"

"Thirty-five."

"Do you know what speed you were going, Mr. Hassan?"

"Forty-two. We just pulled out from the ranger station and for a few seconds I wasn't paying attention." A few seconds. A few seconds could be very costly and Daoud had gotten in the habit of not losing track of his seconds.

"You were going sixty-one, Mr. Hassan."

Daoud looked at the sheriff.

"Sixty-one. That's almost 30 miles over the speed limit, Mr. Hassan. I will be right back with this. Don't get out of your car."

The sheriff walked away.

"There is no way I was going sixty-one," Daoud said quietly.

"You were going forty-five tops," Maise whispered. "I have been watching you this whole drive and forty has felt fast. There is no way you were up to sixty-one."

Maise had been looking in her backpack for a tube of chapstick when the siren went off. She did not dare make a move to look for it now.

“I wouldn’t have gone sixty-one. I know better.”

“I know you do.”

Their voices were a blink above a whisper. Neither of them moved, as though in his order to stay in the car he had also commanded them to sit still.

Daoud spoke quietly to himself and Maise scooted her hand over to hold his.

“What is taking him so long?” she asked

“I can’t imagine. He’s running my name but he isn’t going to find anything.”

After many more minutes, the sheriff walked back to their car and handed the documents through the window.

“I wrote you a ticket. You have three choices: since you haven’t had a speeding ticket in the last year, you can do driver’s school, which is what I would recommend. Or you can pay the fine, or you can go to court. As I said, I recommend driver’s school.”

“Thank you, sir,” Daoud said. “I just can’t believe I was going sixty-one. I am a cautious driver and I do pay attention to my speed. I had just glanced and saw that the speedometer read 42.”

“I just follow what my radar gun says and I don’t lie here and I don’t lie in court.”

“I am not accusing you of lying, sir. I am incredulous is all. I had just pulled out from the ranger station and this is a mountain road so I am especially careful.”

“Perhaps not as careful as you think. What are you saying Mr. Hassan?”

“Nothing more than that it seems almost impossible that I could be going sixty-one.”

“You were speeding, Mr. Hassan. You were going almost thirty miles over the speed limit. I wrote it as a civil infraction, not a criminal one.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Drive safely and you two have a good rest of the afternoon.”

Daoud returned the insurance card and his license back into his wallet. Maise took the registration paper from him and placed it in the glove compartment. She put her bag on the floor between her feet, the chapstick forgotten.

They drove further up the mountain and for a short time kept their silence.

“There is no way we were going that fast.”

“I know,” she said. “But what are you going to do about it? He said he doesn’t lie in court. He said that to tell you that he will show up in court. It is his word against yours; who do you think will be believed?”

“I was speeding a little, but nowhere near that fast. Maybe he had it set for kilometers.”

They both considered this.

“If confronted he could always say he had made an honest mistake and had it set for kilometers not miles. Maybe he is gambling that I am not going to challenge him.”

They continued on in silence.

“Maybe he was gambling that you would pay the ticket. Maybe his radar gun is broken. Maybe he is a racist. Maybe he needs to meet his quota. Maybe he is bored. There are too many maybes,” she said.

They slowed as they approached the top of the mountain. The car was filled with the smell of pine and wet. They continued on to where their favorite trail ended and pulled into a parking space. On weekends the tiny roadway overflowed with parked SUV's and trucks and cars but today there were only a few other vehicles.

Daoud turned off the engine and the windows sealed in the fresh smell. The two of them sat in the silence of the closed-up car.

“He was wrong you know,” Maise finally said.

“I know. Because maybes.”

“Maybe he works with someone at the ranger station. Maybe they called in and said ‘Middle Eastern man headed your way; get him on anything. Careful though because he is armed with a butterfly net.’”

For the first time since they had left the house they both laughed.

“Armed and dangerous,” Daoud said.

“They already said ‘Middle Eastern’; dangerous is implied.”

They both laughed softly through the thick and sad and sat another few seconds before opening the car doors. Maise pulled on her backpack that contained a bottle of water, spinach and cheese fatayer, two small apples, and a bag of nuts. They both agreed they did not need their rain jackets.

Daoud opened the back door and lifted the butterfly net off of the backseat. He still felt pride when he held it. He had made it for Basil when he was seven. One evening they had all been sitting together for dinner. Basil had been talking about migratory patterns of butterflies and Daoud's mind had started wandering. His eyes had rested briefly on his wife's embroidery shelf where she had baskets filled with different yarn, needles, canvas, two thin dowels, and a few wooden hoops. As his gaze relaxed and his eyes crossed a bit, the items merged together.

After dinner Daoud had gone to her shelf and pulled out the embroidery hoops and dowels.

“Do you have one of these hoops you don't need?”

“Are you taking up stitching?” her tiny laugh always sent a spark through him.

“No, I would like to use it for something else.”

“Which would you like?”

He held up the largest one and thanked her.

Over the next few days he had gone to a craft store and done some experimenting with different materials, ultimately creating this butterfly net he had just removed from the backseat. Basil had been ecstatic. The day he had finished it Basil had insisted they go to the mountain together because they might be able to catch some butterflies before they left. For several years the butterfly net had been Basil's key to power and a guaranteed trip to the mountain.

When he started middle school his interests changed and their visits to the mountains to catch butterflies grew less and less frequent. They had years without a visit to the mountains as without Basil to guide them it had seemed a pointless endeavor.

Close to a year after the accident, Maise was still unrecognizable to Daoud many days, heavy and slow and unable to find humor in any situation, unable to connect with him in any way. Her grieving consumed her whole being, while his seemed more to have its own compartment deep within him. He made constant attempts to lift her spirits and comfort her, but there was no action he could take that seemed to reach her, which both hurt and terrified him. A friend convinced her to go talk to a doctor who prescribed her anti-depressants. Not long after she had started taking the medicine, she had returned to many of the things she loved, especially working in her garden and doing her embroidery, though even as she did them with care and focus, Daoud could see that something had changed. With time he had come to accept the change.

One Saturday morning he had come outside to find his wife doubled over in her garden. At first he thought she had passed out, but as he got closer he saw that she was crouched over looking at a butterfly and was talking to it. Daoud had stood still for what felt like several minutes until he saw his wife pull herself up and resume her gardening. She had worked with a smile on her face for the first time in many, many months.

“It is a beautiful day to be gardening,” he said.

“Did you see?”

Daoud was not sure what she was referring to, her talking to a butterfly or the butterfly itself.

“See what?” he had asked for clarity.

“God sent me a message. Basil is at peace. God sent me an emissary.”

Maise had not turned to see the tears rolling down her husband’s cheeks.

Throughout the day the image of his wife folded over in the garden talking to a butterfly kept coming back to him. A few days later he had gone to the closet to get out a new filter for the air conditioning when he came across the butterfly net. He lifted it up and rewound the tape in his mind, could almost touch the joy they had lived as a family.

He had carried it into the kitchen where she was sitting at the table reading on her computer. “Let’s take a trip to the mountain. Perhaps we can bring a butterfly back for your garden.”

And so began their ritual of visiting the mountain. They caught one butterfly that first day but Maise had been so horrified by the idea of it being trapped and away from its home that they had set it free. He brought the butterfly net on every trip because it made him think of happier times.

They walked in silence toward the ending of the trail, each bubbled in thought. They had not completed the main loop in years, first because of his knees and then because of her vertigo. In recent years they started at the end of the trail, joking that they were following their alphabet and beginning from right to left. Besides, the end of the trail was gentler and provided a lovely view of the city. It also tended to have fewer

people on it as it was the end of only one trail and not the start to three. The path was clearly marked and began with a gentle uphill on hard mud packed down from foot traffic and the rains of the last couple of weeks. They both noted the cleanliness of the path.

“I forget how much cooler it is up here,” Daoud said.

“Mountains,” she replied with heavy breath.

They were still in the heavily wooded part of the path that had not yet opened up to a large view of the valley below and the city beyond. Maise leaned against a tree and looked down.

“He is always with us,” said Daoud.

“I know. I miss him. I miss him every day.”

From the quiet came heavy footsteps and talking. From where Maise was standing she couldn't see the approaching hikers, could just hear them.

“Why do they make so much noise?” she asked Daoud who had stopped and turned to face the path from where they'd come.

“It is the American way.”

A large yellow dog arrived first, followed by a woman's voice saying “She's friendly.”

“Friendly if you like dogs,” Daoud said to Maise who smiled and pinned herself against the tree. She had been terrified of dogs for most of her life. In the months after Basil's death when she stopped reacting to anything, she found that dogs would often come to her and sniff at her and that it sometimes felt nice.

This dog was large and running off the leash. It paused by Maise beside the tree. In the past Maise would have made her insides go still, hoping it would keep the dog from smelling her fear. Now she liked the look of its big eyes. The dog stuck its wet nose up against her hand and brushed against her in a companionable way.

Following the dog was a young woman dressed in tight exercise pants and a matching tank top. Her thick, shoulder-length hair bobbed as she walked. She took her time to look at each of them, smile, and say hello.

Daoud held his butterfly net against his side as she passed. He smiled and for a split second their eyes locked, an exchange he did not often have with Americans, a familiarity passed between them.

They heard more footsteps as her companion approached. The dog had looped back to check on the young man who stepped down next to the tree against which Maise was leaning.

“Hello,” he said.

Maise had been looking at the dog and smiling. “The dog likes to walk!” she said and looked up at the young man who was an arm's length from her.

She froze, her eyes clinging to the face of the young man in front of her.

“She does,” he said in a honey-smooth voice. “Sorry, I hope she didn't startle you. We didn't think anyone would be up this way.”

“It's okay,” said Daoud. “We don't mind at all.”



Maise's insides had gone still, but not out of fear. The young man turned to her once more with a half smile.

"Enjoy your walk," Maise said to the young man.

"Thank you. You do the same," he said, taking his time to look from Maise to Daoud. "Come on, Luna," he said and did an awkward skip to catch up with the girl.

"Did you see him?" whispered Maise after they were out of earshot. She was still staring after them.

"I did."

"They could be twins."

"They could."

They each stood rooted and stared down the path where the couple went.

"Did we see a ghost?"

"There is no such thing as ghosts."

"We don't know that."

"We do. That was not a ghost."

"They look so much alike."

"They do."

"I need to sit for a minute."

"I do too."

"Let's go back to the beginning and sit on a rock that overlooks the creek. I don't think either of us is much in the mood for walking. The trees will do us good though."

The air was thick with the moisture of the recent rains as they walked slowly with the empty butterfly net and heavy memories. They headed back down to the trailhead and over to the creek. Both were alert, both hoping to catch a glimpse of the man who carried their son's face.

"She seems like a nice girl," said Maise as they walked side by side across the tiny footbridge.

Daoud laughed. "You can tell this in thirty seconds of seeing her?" Even as he said this he wanted to take back his words. He had thought exactly the same thing.

"You saw it too," said Maise.

"I did."

"He is happy. He is free."

They walked along the creek and sat down on a small boulder at its edge. Because of the rains the creek was fuller and more vigorous than usual. The afternoon filled with the clip clop noise of the water rushing down the mountain.

"No butterflies today."

"No butterflies. Just one speeding ticket and one ghost."

**WHILE SITTING IN TRAFFIC ON A TUESDAY EVENING  
BY K. R. KING**

Every morning, we wake up  
And wonder why life can't be "the dream"  
You know,  
That dream that great poets  
Have been writing about for centuries,  
And why can't we have more than what we have?  
It's insanity, this rat race  
Always wanting more  
Only seeing what is wrong  
Always looking for Trouble  
One thing I have learned is  
That if a person goes looking for Trouble,  
They will surely find it.  
And while everything innocent certainly  
Does come to trial in this lifetime  
I think there is merit in how a person pulls through  
It takes a great strength to say  
That each morning is a new opportunity  
To seize the day, carpe diem: "Seize the day!"  
Or so they say  
But what is *meant* is  
"Grind away!"  
Our teachers and parents and guidance counselors and coaches  
And pastors and inspirational motivators on the air making fifty dollars on every CD they  
can get us to buy because we are so depressed and desperate  
That they can solve all of our problems in just eight hours on a four disc set —  
Yes, all that optimistic bullshit that anyone from a recovering heroine addict to a "re-  
formed" rapist,  
Or a professor emeritus with 2 masters degrees and 3 doctorates,  
Or a doctor with a magical pen and paper to prescribe away the pain can feed into our  
South Parked, Survivored, American Idol'd minds to lull us into a false sense of security  
—  
What that doctor doesn't know is that some people can't live without pain  
Does that even make sense?  
Or the latest self-motivation book at the nearest Barnes & Noble, Like the one three-quar-  
ters of a mile from my house-  
Yes, each morning is a new opportunity  
To do one's best, one's absolute best  
And it's nice to, just for once, hear someone appreciate  
The good times when the times are good  
And want some peace  
The depressing past that's permanently burrowed  
Somewhere in the back of my mind,

Or worldly foolishness, scary as it may be  
Or the fear of not knowing what will happen tomorrow  
It's things like turning on the big screen  
And watching society tear itself apart from the inside out on national television  
Always looking for someone to blame,  
The Jew, the dyke or the fag, the feminist, the whoever it may be  
Please don't point your self-righteous, bigoted sausage fingers at me  
I'm not to blame for the downfall of civilization  
Downfall implies that there was once a high point from which to fall  
City on a hill, city on a mound,  
City on an acid trip if you ask me  
It's all the same  
So we wake up, day after day  
Worrying about the congestion on the 15 or the 91 or the 605,  
Or the 210 or the 101 or wherever millions of people flock together —  
With a sense of mad unity while they desperately floor it to get away  
To wherever they “need” to get to  
It would be nice.  
Why can't we just throw one huge tailgating party  
And live for a day?  
Wondering how we paid the bills last month  
And how we will manage to pull it off again this month  
In fact, wondering how we will manage to get through the next year  
And hoping that life will throw us a bone sometime between the 1st and the 15th  
When the next car repayment note is due  
All we can do is all we can do  
Nothing more, nothing left  
So turn off the television, crank up the volume on your life and do all you can do  
Because life is the greatest improvisation of all Just don't let it go to your head.

## **SILENCED ME**

**BY BUWASO IBRAHIM RAZACK**

Tick tok just like a clock I count  
Ready to explode like a-timing Bombo  
I vow never to be silenced gainst the Bodies of my fore fathers.  
Dear revolutionary you baffle me  
You talk to me about the favors that you gave to my nation  
You forgot that the lands and my ancestors favored you  
You put our people's lives on the front rows as you hide behind walls  
They Were your shields.

At a tender age you took them from their homes with lies of changing their country's image  
Yet you Were sacrificing them for you own interests —  
You pathetic liar —  
I dare you to silence us with your ego  
Now that our mouth is open  
We shall fume exuding the stench of a rotten eggs  
We are the stain that will never leave your white shirt.  
Dear revolutionary  
We heard that who ever speaks is silenced by your your powers  
We dare you to revert your anger against innocent souls, weaponless, unarmed.  
The rise of the Rebellious has risen from the souls of the silenced and censored.  
He will cut lose the chained, young, old and ancestors  
For you know the power is in the hands of the people  
He will arm us with red Barrett's  
Pen and paper  
Walk around the streets peaceful chatting slogans of your hate to hear "People power."  
We shall raise both hands up as a-sign of peace.  
We march to the state house demanding what's ours: freedom for Democracy and  
freedom for speech  
and a change in Leadership.  
For you have failed us as a nation.  
Bring out your artillery of any colour black mamba, special force, black squad for they  
won't save you.  
He shall order the student Youths to a rise just like Haile Selassie of Ethiopia did  
Nelson Mandela of South Africa —  
You have choked us on corruption, hate, poor healthcare, poverty and division —  
Dear revolutionary you baffle me.

**TEARS FOR NIGERIA**  
**BY CHINONYEREM CHINWENDU**

I cry for the world, as they seek for revenge; seeking for Biafra to  
be and Nigeria to be.

-

I fear the heartless pharoahs of the leaders, as they slaughter humans  
as chickens for new year.

-

Women cry, baby cry, men cry, as they cry for the betterness of the nation,  
Blood shed like water on the ground.  
Weeping for the world.

**EXIT ROW**  
**BY NICHOLAS BUSSELMAN**

Sympathy and hostility connected them,  
the asylum seeker and the student activist,  
fast-friends in this social spectacle,  
quickly criminals in this standoff  
with the majorities, the TSA, mob and Man.

The footage shows and shows  
Three airport security personnel, two suits and a uniform  
seizing the standing pair  
for stranding them there.  
When they left the plane broke  
into applause.

They are refusing to sit for the live-stream, despite  
apprehensions and a struggle for composure  
in the face of man's dignity, on behalf of his inability,  
reacts a girl's understanding of her own complicity.  
Unremarkably her credo is: "I am doing what I can."

Later, I watch it again, my outrage distant, passed,  
Just another click away is another example, elsewhere,  
A Charybdis of distance and dissonance,  
our survival is always on display, always our decay.  
Swipe left. Man resists less the more he has too.  
Giving in to time at the terminus of a life.  
My ticket gives me the right to comply.

She was released to her parents  
before they left the airport. Authority's kin.  
And he was deported anyway,  
at a later date, on a quiet plane,  
in an exit row.

**WELCOME TO MY ISLAND**  
***THRASHING OUT THE TRUTH***  
**BY MBIZO CHIRASHA**

*2019 IHRAF International Fellow*

In the land, where senselessness rules, a man is lonely if he embraces truth. For truth, is a dark bird, that should melt with the night shadows. His home is his mind on an island way away from the floatsome debris of brokenness and the stench of betrayal that characterizes the running Bazaar of men death of consciousness.

Welcome to the Continent of contractual maladies of overripe pretenses. Here, you stand short before the court of mass abusers. Blame is apportioned to the blameless. Character is the first casualty in finishing off a man before generic products from the lands of biological warfare, bears and pandas are fed into your system so your death certificate can be colored with some known end.

Sons of freedom strugglers are castrated. Their balls squeezed with party pliers till they squeal with hoarse voices of ghosts of dead bones in the dungeons of their tormented minds. A place to rest the broken ribs is on caves in the Misty mountains where goliras and baboon's shyly skirt around the two legged affair with a demented mind cursing the gods of truth. The only song afloat in the Fevered mind of a displaced soul is the song of lamentations that rolls down the forest floor like giant Lianas without trees to hang their mossy coats on.

Welcome to the Countries where death is no longer a threat but a way of life and predictable like known religious dates. Here the stalker and the enemy is one and the same, perhaps joined in unholy matrimony or by kinship matrix. The philosophy of man having a price is heavily subsidized with incentives all green and crispy in quantities enough to keep drinks flowing for weeks.

Welcome to the realms of social policing that rapes reality of the sufferers in the same fashion as the state rapist. The language and status is capital letters giving it a "stand alone etiquettes" like baptism of a swine with a clean name hoping to change its exuberant past time with dirt and stench. As they say in rural villages long used to speaking in crypt tongues, "washing a free range chickens legs is a mission in futility". NGOs once had a missionary mission in lands where bias needed to walk straight paths. No longer. They now eat with the Lions, scavenge with buzzards and weeps with the endangered rhinos.

Money being a leveler of uneven grounds, heaps of it has narrowed the narrative of the persecuted to read dissident in quotes.

Where then does truth go to tell it's two cents of observed and experienced trauma's of being alive in the world of monkeys who are too fat to swing the trees? Where does truth stand to recount injuries of the land and victims of deprivation when the crocodile is the judge of truth about all those whom he swallowed as they attempted to Cross the river of poverty?

Where does truth pitch it's tent to make a report of those the soil covers in unmarked graves if open sewers are the resting places of tongues that went into the good night at midday in organized kidnappings?

Welcome to the space where paradox parades it's poachery of piety replacing it with pitiable fallacy's of plunder and mayhem on truth Sayers and gets away with it because corruption has become the heart beat of a nation recruiting all who wish to earn a quick buck for a piece of indecency.

So truth is marooned into an island where it earns the term, “terminally insane.” There ,it’s left to slowly disintegrate into bits of Monologues bitterly contesting inner voices that once swam in clean waters before being flung into the central unnatural order of disorder where wrongs rights nothing and hope is measured by ability to swim with sharks eventually all the way to the belly and out as pellets of shit Into an ocean so dark, even the saintly sun shies to shine it’s light knowing the devil lives in the deep of schemers like worms in a cadaver.

Way out then is the lonely path of vagabond entities, scurrying under the radar less sky riding on a prayer and resilience of an explorer to where sense listen and offers a respite from the scorching jabs of men whose souls got bought by an unrepentant revolution gone mad.

A man becomes an Island carrying his truth away from where it could benefit the loser’s. And in his heart, he chants an old saying.

“Truth never dies even if I do.”

And a soul rides on the waves of the universe, carrying its shell of pasts shrunken dreams. Stepping gingery on the Rocky paths of guessed paths and dark corners, trusting Providence with utmost faith. To suffer uprootedness is a tragedy many just read about and marvel at the victims resilience in the face of foggy presentations of realities so fearful, insanity is a constant companion. Dressed in loneliness, drunk on anxiety, every shadow draws a dagger to draw blood. Every sound is amplified footsteps of a pursuing foe. Every breath is drawn with calculation lest it’s too loud to draw attention to it’s location. Constantly on edge, paranoia settles into a pattern that persists even in sleep. A restlessness settles on the nerves wrecking further havoc on a body poorly fed. To run is then the only option and woe is the soul that knows not the way of sincere prayers or the reliance on guiding hands from the unknown where whips rain on known locales. To hide is no longer a game or jest for enemies real and imagined plague the surroundings prompting irrational and rational to collide into a fantasia of erratic moves in jerky coordination. At this plane, goings on in the mind are heated debates extolling options not taken and what could have been had silence won over telling of truth.

A prophet is a lonely soul often encumbered by the weight of his message which he never has the luxury of not telling. Such are the few who die en route searching for a safe haven from the hellish lands where truth never grows roots. Such are the few who run to see tomorrow’s sun from caving dungeons away in the middle of the unknown holding prayers as an anthem for hope. Such are the few who bravery and courage set apart for persecution at home and who by the grace of the purity of the universe and its respect of truth, presents miracles from the most unlikely of places.

Whether tagged a “runaway”

Whether ratted a “fugitive”

Truth never bowed to coercion.

Truth is a hero in hiding or in the open

Truth is resident of life and not a visitor

Truth is a master and servant and cannot be denied

Truth never rusts however long it’s imprisoned

Truth is a judge and counsel.

Truth never sleeps even when its Carrier does. It's the reason why ,from the heart of a stranger whose second names is a battle for the tongue to pronounce, hope is dropped onto the lap of a fleeing spirit, to at once feel the human connection of care and empathy. And hope rises once more. Bitterness recedes and the mission of truth sits a little fairly. Perhaps a smile from a warm meal. Perhaps a tear for gratitude. Perhaps a gripping yearning to hear a familiar voice of love. Perhaps a lot more.....but for the moment, the cloud has cleared. Running has slowed to a walk and the feel of the sun is on the skin warming deeper.

Yes. Man is a worse monster to his own than a hostile ghost. He casts out his own to die in the deserts of unknown terrains to keep truth of his less than clean ways away from those he rules. Corruption has become an evil religion whose followers thrive on murder of any and all bearers of truth.

But man too, is a savior of his own kind. A stranger relating to another stranger as a fellow human. A feeling that rises to feed and clothe one bare of basics.

Yes. Man is his own ill and his cure  
one casts, one catches.

One chase's, one places,

And the world rolls on, parts with blinkers shading their innocence from the needs of those unfortunate to live under the terror of maniacal schemers of dictatorships, who murder as punishment for truth told, and those who feel every pain of a fellow human suffering the "crime of telling the truth."

This balance of Providence against the pathetic shenanigans of thugs masquerading as leaders of men is what gives hope to humanity that TRUTH, may have a lofty price for its teller to pay, but it's the ONLY way it knows to operate.

For those Truth choses as its mouthpiece, history has sad Chronicles, even tragic, but lessons abide about the indomitable spirit of truth that remain restless till it rises to tell its bit regardless of the consequences.

For the prophets who bear the scars of carrying the burden of telling the truth, let the universe speak to more strangers on your path to stand in the gap.

A man is an island and the island is man. Both are the universe. Each is complete. Both are completely companionable. Truth is the fruit that feeds the companionship to a fair world.

If only more could embrace it?

## **MOTHERLAND**

**BY BUWASO IBRAHIM RAZACK**

My mother land

We are bleeding and choking on pride anger and stupidity

The same race has gone against its self

Brothers and sisters have gone against each other, They have hated their own success



They have betrayed our ancestors,  
They have betrayed struggles the blood shade of our freedom fighters  
They have built wall and boundaries against their own races,  
They have fed them on hate ,Insults, Tears, Turned our siblings into orphans some to  
widows  
Crime has become our daily meal  
Blood is paint on street walls  
Gun shoots and crying voices have turn over the beautiful sound of birds  
My motherland has been turned into a refugee champ  
We are Baggers in our own decency land  
where did the hate come from  
Who gave birth to this shame segregation in mother land  
Mother whoever try to say out the truth is shutdown  
Jailed ,tortured , bribed some even threatened with death  
Lies are the daily bread to our children  
We are chocking on wrong leadership over righteousness  
We have turned our lives to worshiping political leader for surviving

## **FLAWED MIRACLE**

**BY BELINDA NICOLL**

Inside the birthing camp, people huddled around an eland cow that had dropped to the ground in distress. As the San medicine woman approached, a youngster jumped up to let her through the gate. Catching sight of her, the game lodge owner pressed his palm to his heart. She nodded, accepting the man's gesture as respect for the legends attached to the eland, though some part of her mind saw it as a sign of relief at the payoff of his costly investment. Up close, she noticed a tail protruding from the birth canal—a backward calve.

“No time to wait for the vet,” the man said. “Thanks for coming.”

She bunched up her calico skirt and sank to her arthritic knees. “Let's see how the legs are positioned.”

“I'll try and keep her calm.” He grabbed the cow by the horns, all the time cooing softly. She pushed both her hands into the birth canal. Feeling just one hoof, she bit down on her lips. As she plunged one arm deeper, birth fluid sloshed out. She groped around quickly and took a deep breath as her hand clasped around the other hoof that was lodged a little farther up. As gently as she could, considering her own discomfort, she lifted the unborn calf's hip slightly while pressing against the walls of the cow's stomach; then she quickly straightened the bent leg into the birth canal. As the throbbing in her knees became unbearable, she extricated her hands from the cow's uterus. Falling backward onto her butt, she yelled, “Get ready; it's coming.”

The concentration on the man's face intensified. When the two tiny legs appeared seconds later, the medicine woman grabbed a hold of them and pulled slowly to ease the calf's hips through first, before the rest of it slipped out as fast as a bow from an arrow. The cow wriggled, and the man let go of her horns. As the cow struggled up, she dropped her afterbirth. Then she started licking her male offspring, but the little one just laid there, bleating weakly.

"Uh-oh, broken leg," the man said.

The medicine woman patted the calf's head. "It's not the end of the world; you're lucky to be alive, little one."

Cupping his hand around his mouth, the man shouted orders at his farm help to rig up a splint. By the time they'd managed to set the calf's broken leg, he let out a heavy sigh, like someone who'd discovered a flaw in a designer item.

The medicine woman gave a chortle of reassurance. "Don't worry; all the other eland will fuss over him now—like one big, happy family." Glimpsing a slight tremble in the man's chin, she laid her hand on his arm. "I've heard you'll soon have your own baby to treasure."

Nodding lightly, the man murmured through a tight smile. "I'm going to love that baby ... like a good father should."

## **TO RISE AGAIN BY ANN PRIVATEER**

I fell in love  
At a homeless shelter  
With a man who had the bluest eyes  
A man from the Czech  
Republic, we talked  
Just the two of us  
So many things  
In common.  
Two nights later I sat at his table  
for dinner but he was occupied  
talked endlessly with a young man  
did not give me the time of day.  
Love is like microbes  
if your window is open  
they will fly in and out  
your window.

## **POTTERY MAKING BY ANJU KANWAR**

is something of a grand event in my old city. Aficionados agree it is an age-old art. Our ancients - philosophers, rulers and peasants - were fierce practitioners, as are their modern counterparts. It is all in the wheel, and the hands, and the cast. They understand that the clay, if too dry or soaked, becomes putrefied like week-old trash in the mercury rain outside, or like a female fetus (though some say one-year old), or a stray cat (striped, full-white or black) — killed the other night under wheels of chrome-plated steel as it dared to streak to the other side of the road; not to speak of those grown women who wear body art in black and blue, at other times, a simple shroud. Though some brave potters let slip the notion for this last - piously of course - that, if we look, we would see the women practically wrench lathes and contort motion to cover themselves with lacerations, and while they are at it, throw themselves into holy fire, after they shape and weave their own veil to boot. Becoming god is such a hoot.

After all, two times a year, in Spring and Fall, on the eighth or ninth day of the nine-day *Navratri* festival, brightly chattering, laughing girls make crossings before they grow their girlish parts. Mother Goddess at the ramparts. They wield hope on washed feet, inhabit strength in *mauli* tied wrist. Red paste daubed across their forehead shines an epiphany of knowing when to stand firm so the demon kneels. A child savoring food upon her tongue believes herself written. This child knows money is a drive, a hunger, a fate, mind's temple, god's gate. Even time leans back with a smile at this act of living.

Still, the girls vanish, one by one.

And the riddle never-ending bolts across my chest:

fear leaves no lasting tracks behind,

just sweeps and sweeps the pottery bits - with powerful zeal - in hypnotic dance divine.

## **A SHORT ESSAY ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ART FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND JUSTICE BY TABASSUM TAHMINA SHAGUFTA HUSSEIN**

*IHRAF International Fellow 2020*

"Art is nothing more than the shadow of humanity."

Henry James

The term "Art" is vast and fathomless. Nowadays, when we refer to Art, it does not mean only painting. It is from literature to music, dance, drama, performance art to miscellaneous. We see the identical crisis of Humanity, our existential crisis. We are losing our

senses and have become too selfish, self-obsessed as Friedrich Nietzsche predicted to be the "The Last Man." The causes? Maybe we have become too materialistic. We have turned our eyes from the beauty and the Art. Art is the medium to make us feel conscience. According to Henry James, Art itself is a shadow of Humanity. For example, a child is brutally murdered. We read in the newspapers, watch on television, and within a few days, the impact on the mind is lost into oblivion. But the Art, the shadow of Humanity, can arise sense and conscience into human hearts. A poem for the murdered child, columns, articles, graffiti, a painting of that child, a drama staged on the death of the murdered child, can have more impact on human spirits. We feel connected. We rise against the heinous act. We are shocked by the brutality. Our minds, when all our primary senses, namely eyes, ears, and lips, are engaged, these have more influence on the thoughts. We feel! We begin to think. We discuss and raise our voices seeking justice for Human Rights. We create awareness. That's how Art can be instrumental. It enhances our desire for freedom of expression and speech, which are needed for seeking justice.

1) *I have been writing poems about Rohingya refugee issues and one poetry published twice. I have written a column on Rohingya Refugees.*

2) *I have written a column on anti-terrorism, and I stand by it.*

3) *I have written both poems and columns against human rights violations.*

4) *In my poetry and editorials, I have used the surreal approach and not a violent one. As an aesthete, there is no way; I can be without a touch of beauty in my creative endeavors.*

5) *Human Rights and Humanity are vital to me. Wherever I have felt that I need to speak for the voiceless, I have written with the knowledge that it is not welcomed by the particular group who don't care about human rights. My columns are published in India. I share my poems and articles in my social media. I do not fear to be noticed by the authority. It is my strength to speak for the unheard voices. To stand for the voiceless with my pen, which is mightier than the sword. At the same time, I have senses to say what, when, and from where via what. I follow Cicero's quote, "Appetitus Rationi Pareat"(Let your desires be ruled by reason.)*

6) *I am dedicated to sincerity to my causes, which are Humanity and aestheticism.*

7) *My essences of existence are Humanity and aestheticism. I write featuring Human Rights to love, beauty, feelings, compassion, Greek myth-based poems. I share not only my columns and poetry but also share other poet's work and literary magazine news updates on my social media. I believe in the world of Art and the literature; we must not compete. We are there to support each other and assist. This attitude makes a kind of bond and fosters to create a community.*

8) *In the world of literary magazines, we are termed as "People of Color." Though struggling, I keep going on.*

9) *In my own country, I understand the newspaper's self-censorship. But that did not stop me from speaking for the voiceless. I have published the voices from other platforms and abroad.*

10) *Being a struggling poet, I do not take any payment for my poems and write-ups. I try to donate and contribute to literary magazines in my humble ways.*

When we look at Art, we see our shadows. With the beauty of the Art, we can gaze at the darker side of ourselves, thus making us conscious of our actual existence. Our subconscious thrives and leads our way to awakening for ourselves, namely Humanity, and seeking justice for all that is wrong against Human Rights and aestheticism.

**A LETTER TO BLACK WOMAN  
BY RAZACK BUWASO IBRAHIM**

Dear black woman

It's me ur son slim shady

Long hair, chocolate skin, white black eyes, white tooth and pinkish lips and brilliant brain

This is my token of thanks to your brave heart soul and mind that you passed onto me I won't doubt the world calls you the Empress or Queen for you deserve all description of greatness

With black you have proved that

I vowed never to have a glance at ur red teared eyes

For you never showed it to me when it hurt you to the core

From the insults pathetic names u were called

A hoe, Bitch, prostitute, strip That u know it was what they portrayed of you

A clean smart brave heart mind and soul you have

Look I would not be mad at you if all they called out was you I would understand u

know why I have never seen any person brave to fight fears like you black woman

You survived slavery, Rape defilement at young age and grow with it at heart Brain damages what they did to scare you off but rather turned into ur courage to fight back.

Oprah once said he raped me and I defeated the fear he implicated in me to great woman

So wondering they even created viruses to reduce the number of brave creatures you created

You are their nightmare, threat, Bufflehead, topic that doesn't have answers

They chained you and you walked along traded you and still stayed silent they delivered you to their market points in disguise of house maids farm workers and u played along they forgot to take out ur Herat and souls for captivity

So funny how they made offsprings out of you to wash away ur race

Dear Dark Chocolate skin I adore you

The smiles you cry are tearing to all those that turned you down

What ever you did you held onto a foolishly hopeful smile

Your beauty and smile ages like fine wine

The fact that you torment them and question their conscious is enough fight back

You used stones thrown at u to build an breakable empire walls

You never followed rules u followed ur heart

They fed you on leftovers of the same food you cooked for them

## **BROWN SHOE**

**BY JONATHAN FERRINI**

What has befallen you and led you to the center of a busy intersection, alone, at the peril of being crushed by racing cars? You remain erect and proud, as if standing at a counter of an expensive boutique, or dancing in the moonlight at a lavish cocktail party. What was your journey to this perilous intersection, brown shoe?

You resemble a fashionable, early twentieth century, woman's, ankle high shoe, with elaborate brogue design and brown, silk laces. You're made of beautiful, polished, brown leather, which has aged gracefully. Were you lovingly hand made by a master cobbler in Europe for a wealthy matron, or mass produced by immigrants for upscale shoe stores? Were you worn by a wealthy socialite, or a beautiful debutante? Your size suggests you were worn by a petit woman, perhaps, a blond, brunette or a redhead? Was a man fortunate to have married you, or, did you simply date handsome suitors for your amusement?

Perhaps you were an entrepreneur, a professional woman, corporate chieftain, or a loving homemaker?

How many exotic travels did you enjoy, and romantic encounters did you relish? What were your heartbreaks and disappointments? Did you have children?

What has befallen you, beautiful brown shoe? Did you fall off the back of a thrift store truck, or return to visit your former neighborhood of stately Victorian homes, now replaced by skyscrapers? I pray you weren't struck in the intersection as you traveled to your afternoon tea with friends, and I shudder to think, you might have been an elderly woman, slowly crossing the street, not making it through the crosswalk in time, before being hit by a careless driver.

As I fight rush hour traffic to present my grandmother's eulogy, you remain in my thoughts, brown shoe. My grandmother lived to be 103 years old. She was a tireless, progressive, trailblazer in business and politics. She was active in the civil rights movement, fought for equal pay and justice for women, and was an ardent environmentalist. Until the last few years of her life, she had a busy social calendar which included her beloved ballroom dance classes. My grandmother was a "global citizen", and was concerned for the future of the planet. Her credo was, "Everyone and everything has value and purpose in life."

I want to rescue you from being crushed in the intersection, so I may cherish you as a valuable family heirloom, or provide you as a gift to my daughter who might research your history. Alas, I'm already blocks away, too late to retrieve you from the perilous intersection.

I pray a kind soul will recognize your beauty, retrieve you from peril, and you will find a home in an upscale vintage thrift store, clothing museum, or become a prized addition to a woman's shoe collection.

As I peer into the rear view mirror, I see an old, homeless woman, pushing her shopping cart neatly packed with her life's possessions.

She stops, picks you up, and gently polishes you, as if finding you in a fine boutique. She carefully places you in her shopping cart with her other prized possessions. You reminded me of lost loves, revered, departed relatives, and inequities in our world my beloved, grandmother would work tirelessly to resolve. My remarks at grandmother's eulogy will have new meaning.

Thank you, brown shoe.

## **AMERICAN DRILL**

### **BY BRYN SWISTON**

When the drills began in elementary school, our hands were unlined. Waiting in the dark, the whites of the young eyes flashing around the room, like stars flickering in the sky. We should have been reading *The View from Saturday*. Now we crouch with empty hands our only protection: the odds. Knees drawn to our chests, the heavy breathing creates a weight. It feels like gas. In through the nose. Out through every set of tightly drawn, gray lips. "I'm sorry. It wasn't like this before." That's what the teachers always say before they turn off the lights and take shelter themselves. "I'm sorry." Click Why was this not like this before? Is it because we've forgotten how to love? Is it because we feel so torn apart from each other? We can't let people drift away from us. We must pull them in tightly and say "You matter. You are not alone in this harsh and confusing time." Maybe someday America will do this. But for now, the lights come back on, blindingly bright. And we crawl out from beneath the tables. And we the students take our seats, staring at the ground. Silent.

## **WILL YOU LISTEN TO US?**

### **BY TABASSUM TAHMINA SHAGUFTA HUSSEIN**

*IHRAF International Fellow 2020*

We are the unheard and unsolicited voices.  
Oh! No, sometimes to you we sound like always nagging beggars.  
We come from the land of green grass,  
With faces of colours, dark, brown and black.  
Uncivilized, ill-mannered poor creatures!  
Ghastly!  
Sometimes you listen with pretence and laugh later.  
We promise, we would be gentle.  
Please! Listen,  
If you don't, who is going to lend the ear to our misery?  
You show compassion and you forget when TV camera lights are gone.

Sometimes you give us a look as we are unwanted burden.  
To you we only beg and beg, to you we have big mouths to fill, your eyes only see  
naked beggars.  
Have you ever heard of our silent cry?  
We lament and lament on our misery only in vein.  
Have your hearts ever heard our clamouring?  
Alas! you only see naked beggars driven away from home.  
You talk about humanity when countless are slaughtered in the genocide.  
Driven away from home, raped, slaughtered, torched, dismembered and mutilated.  
You speak in the podium with such passion,  
But to our cries and appeal for justice, your ears become deaf.  
Queens, celebrities, noble laureates come, hug and go, all in vein.  
Our loved ones are missing never to be returned again.  
But they have left their cries and screams in the air, to be echoed again and again.  
Their cries with our cries, all in one living in the shelter of another land.  
Sometimes we cry without civility, sometimes we fight, we fight for donations like  
dogs fighting over bones.  
Sometimes we do illegal drug business but only to survive.  
Our women are the victims of Human trafficking.  
One day, they are just gone.  
Without traces.  
No one notices.  
Big mouths to fill.  
Our missing girls complains remain in the desk,  
Only to be covered by dusts.  
Our daughters driven away from home,  
And now, taken away from the family  
To the distant land.  
Never to see us again.  
We wait and wait.  
To go back to our homeland.  
There is no end in waiting.  
Just like, Beckett's "Waiting for Godot".  
Vladimir and Estragon,  
After waiting, decide  
To leave and to take shelter.  
Where we left our country  
To survive, to live,  
To breathe.  
Vladimir and Estragon,  
They too,  
Merely stand without moving  
When decide to leave.



We can't decide.

Our fate is not in our hands now.

We can't decide for ourselves.

We can not move.

Where shall we go?

Godot

never comes and our waiting to go back to our homeland never ends.

Now, we live in the camp surrounded by fences, we want to go out, just to breath  
as we are tired of waiting.

To go back to our land.

But with vein hope, we wait to go back

We wait for our Godot.