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DEAR TRUTH

(Nigeria's 59th Independence in review)

BY CHINEDU VINCENT OKORO

I stare at you
and don't you
stare back at me
for having left us
in the dark
all these years!
You allowed yourself
to be an object
of ridicule
to the extent that
our hallowed jury
traded you for penny
and for fear of disposition
You decided to
let anyone
who invokes
your name be a criminal
in this
Godforsaken abode
Your name has
been used on consecrated
and unconsecrated podia
to preach sermons
but you have never
minded to instill
yourself in the
mouths and hearts
of them who invoke you
You are the reason
why we still suck
our mothers' breasts
despite the grey hairs
that sit tight
on our head
When will you
take back your
sovereignty in my abode
just as you have
in far off abodes?

MY FATHER WHO...

BY ANA MARIA FORES TAMAYO

My Father who art in heaven,

Are you really there? And where exactly are your azure skies?

Are your Elysian Fields some ethereal other

in some far-off realm,

or is it a little bit of paradise on earth,

a spotted leaf of green and yellow, harking to the sun,

a rooster cocking his sweet song come morning,

the smell of lusty cafe con leche at dawn's break,

when I sleepily rise from bed,

while my husband hands me my morning mug,

the aroma of celestial heights gently lifting me from slumber?

hallowed be thy name.

Is your name Dios, Allah, Père, Gud, Yahweh, or Eloah?

Is it the trees shimmering gently in the winsome wind,

the thundering waves crashing along the salted seacoast,

the woodpecker tapping the tree trunk to scavenge its next meal,

the child reaching out for his mother's breast?

Thy kingdom come.

thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

If your kingdom does arrive, when will that ever be?

We will soon need that glorious realm breaking dusty dawn,

or have you not seen this wily world fall apart in misery, at the seams,

In the horror of war and greed and pain?

Heaven seems Utopia, yet other earthly too:

nothing here to bear celestial fruit.

Agony faced by migrants, by children hungering at our borders,

fatigued mothers tying shoelaces that fall apart,

holding up torn-up trousers with a shoestring for their boys...

While the big fat men resort to golf clubs in their verdant fields,

Banks rolling in the opulence of few,

their taxed greens only for those full-bodied heavies

behind those gated columns rich in pompous pretense.

Yet the meek lay their wearied heads to rest

between the barred columns of those prison gates:

detention all they know.

Give me this day my daily bread;

I beg you, oh my God.

Give me hope, give me solace, give to them – not me – that little bit of mercy
That we all know can make or break a life...

and forgive me my trespasses,

for having, for not sharing, for enjoying life, for not caring
while little migrant children walk those miles, haunt those shadows,
wake those nightmare dreams...

as I forgive those who trespass against me;

let me cry next to the bully who raised his hand against me,
who called me names, who shattered my fragile ego.

Let me forgive myself for trespassing against my better self.

and lead me not into temptation.

let me find the tranquility of passion, the fruitfulness of gratitude,
the abundance of self-reliance, the fortitude of mercy.

Let me find that young child quivering, let me cover her in splendor,
in coats of strength, of compromise, of angel white.

but deliver me from evil. Deliver me to mercy...

oh my god

WHOSE JEANS?

BY JO ANN HOFFMAN

I bought designer jeans in a Luxembourg boutique
from a stunning, thread-thin, teen-age clerk
who eyed my doubtful shape, thick and sturdy
as an iron post, rolled her lovely deep-set eyes
and said they'd never fit.

Did I care? The denim was soft, stretchy,
the stitching clean and straight,
the zipper smooth as the high-speed rail
from Belgium, and quieter.

They were too long, too tight.

I could zip them up; barely breathe
if I snapped them. But I wore them, loved them:
my high-end, high-fashion souvenir.

Today I noticed the tag beneath the label:
Made in Bangladesh. Stitched with care by Avni.
Avni in Bangladesh. My jeans, her job.

My jeans, her meal ticket, her aching back,
my talisman, my totem —
her future, her fate.

My jeans, her jeans.

I still wear my jeans, still love them,

except for the slight chafing
on the inseam.

THE COMPOUND

BY LES WICKS

They gave her the keys
this community, this jail.
I shuffled before her, a chain gang
or a gang of chains that tied her down?
She ignored the venoms of certainty
there was no restlessness
change loitered by the gates
but recidivism was high.
Walls protect & cage consecutively.
From the mouths of liars
chaos tastes of cyanide
freedom is belladonna.
They gave him the keys,
it was his turn. He lost track of the crimes
as doctors fussed about bunions & coughs.
There were dollars everywhere if you chose to look.
A casino, parliament or gallery
a hospital or school
if you build a wall
everything inside it makes sense.
It just has to
for all our sakes.

ASYLUM

a news story

BY CORDELIA M. HANEMANN

It is raining
on the wind-swept sandlot
of the former landfill where even
rats won't live: a field of tents,
blooms from the chemical plant,
no running water, mud dump
of the world's refuse,
children of foreign lands,

amid the vermin and trash.
Wasil, twelve years old,
4,000 miles from home, lives alone
in the refugee camp with a thousand
other lonely children, sent
into the wilderness to survive.
Hungry for food, bereft
of family and tribe, far from home
and belonging, wrenched from past,
deprived of future, tonight,
he wakes to the rip of a knife
through the nylon of his tent:
a pair of hands grip his throat,
a thief come to steal his nothing.

OBITUARY (OBJECTIVE)

BY KATE ROSE

Today I got an email from my 2nd cousin David. It was called "Facts."

Fact 1: my older brother died shortly before Christmas.

Fact 2: genetic analysis revealed that my father is 5% Jewish from his mother's side.

They killed him. They killed him when he was around 7 years old. I remember how he was before that, a lively boy with curly hair.

Then something went wrong in his brain, and I don't know exactly what they did but they did something, and should be behind bars but are clever enough, and powerful enough, to leave no trace.

He got well enough to have some kids, and then had a heart attack at age 30.

They took care of him. His parents.

And now, they have kindly taken on the kids.

In a big white house on the hill, behind thick oak doors, money, religion, and jobs. Rape. My father's mother was a fervent Catholic; that's how she put up with it thinking a golden castle waited up there. Maybe she was the only one who was not totally evil.

What is the significance, anyway, of 5%?

I blocked this man's email. I no longer feel related to any of them at all.

I cannot grieve for my brother. For me, it was 35 years ago that he died. In the obituary, I am mentioned; as if it were normal, in this well-written prose that reveals nothing: there is no cause of death.

GRACE | GIVE US THIS DAY

— *for Kris Eden, Eugene, OR*

BY STEPHEN JACKSON

Torn bread in the gentle hands
of a punk kid with a shaved head.
No primary colors, just black —
just flesh-dirty crust and a mess
of crumbs settled onto his lap.
All of humanity forgiving him
his solitude, under the tree where
several bikes lean into the bark
and green of its being. Forgiving
him his anger, forgiving us our
hunger, as the rest of us gather
near the meditation rock, beneath
the blooming dogwoods along
the sand-filled box, beside the
winding footpath in the mock
gaslights of Scobert Park, on this
dreary near-dark, though not-yet-
raining Food Not Bombs Sunday
at 4. Torn bread in so many hands
that need for giving no more.

THE SIGN ON THE DEAD END ROAD SAYS REUNION

BY JOHN CASQUARELLI

“The illusion of detachment,” a chronicler once said,
hand leaning on sequoia, looking up as if all history
was born from its branches.

I held my breath briefly, cleared my throat,
crystallized that moment, took pleasure in the voice
that refused to sing with an out-of-tune chorus.

A kind of reverse osmosis.

A molecule moving freely, ungoverned by the
limitations of absolute zero.

“When the con
—forms

we’ll build more cages in Texas to house children
and kill dreams, and it will be justified beneath
the umbra of inflated thoughts.”

There’s a language for every moment.

Syllabic flames clinging to tongues like tight silk to skin.
What is known and unknown lies between pauses.
Ageless cosmic dandelions floating in a soup bowl.
Dreary-eyed, brittle, I turned to the mountainside amid
the violet backdrop, deer running, elegant, relying on
each other and their love affair with gravity.
The mirage of time is rarely smooth. We are all refugees,
nomadic dust scattered by earth, fire, water, and air.

ETERNAL WITNESS
BY STEVE PIAZZA

it must have been when i was small
really small
though not as we'd know it now
floating around unfamiliarity
in places before imagination
darker than imagination
extraneous sensations
even if i felt it happen
its injustice
the pain the suffering under dispassionate skies

i may not have known what it was
even if it works that way
was it one event or all in one
the advent of misery
the ideal of it
and or its opposite kindness
defining reminding that choices, like them or not, are inevitably made
all that happened before after
after before
now confuses everything
makes everyone scramble
in a hurry as if they know something nobody else does
on the way to knowing nothing at all
until the lights cease
then and only then
do they really have a story to tell

listen

**WHO WILL EXPLAIN
BY ANDA PETERSON**

The brown-eyed children
under silver blankets
that sparkle like Christmas tinsel
or gleaming party gowns
worn at country clubs.
The children sleep on the cold floor
do not understand
the wire cages
their loneliness
after the long, hot walk
through the desert.
Do they wonder,
 as children do,
what they did wrong?

Who will explain
to them
this land
where people sleep
on silk sheets
dance on marble floors
after cool rides
in shiny new trucks
through the desert
drunk on comforts.
Who can explain
why these people
never wonder
what they did wrong?

**THE SINGING FOREST
BY NEAL CROOK**

(Haibun)

Your hand grazed my triangle, pink emblem of death, as they dragged you from our cell.
The
soft touch pierced my heart. I wanted to cling to you, but fear made me cower. Your last
glance
devastated. The words echoed through my despair, "We must exterminate these people
root

and branch.” I knew your forest-fate.

Poles stand in a row
Bodies hung high to perish
Inhuman howling

Stationed on a hook your voice joined the screams reverberating through the encampment. The sound palpable. The shrieks transformed to a chorus of songs. You became a tree. “Root and Branch” Tall, determined to sing your existence, your truth. Your voice joined the others,

beautiful harmonies resounded.
Trees made of flesh sing
Songs echoing through the dark
Touch the survivors

Spared from extermination, the memory haunts me. Your face a mirage in my desert. Considered a criminal not a victim, tears speak my tale. My eyes have seen the singing forest, but I cannot sing its song. I remain silent, patiently carrying my burden.

Silence enshrouds me
Memories torture my soul
I must sing your song

Inspired by the documentary “Paragraph 175.” Dedicated to the homosexuals whose souls still sing in the forest and to those who survived the Holocaust and cannot find the words to share their pain.

LANGSTON
BY JOHN PIETARO

The poet sings of rivers.
Standing at mountain’s edge,
He stares down the sky and
Embodies the pain of a people.
The poet mourns his testament
But never his words,
Bearing phrase, rhyme and couplet

To cleanse the very language.
The pen carves out his reality,
Raining messages of hope and lament as
One,
Lacerating boundaries
Fluently
As drawing
Sword from stone.

COLOURS

BY LOU FABER

We hunted him as a stag
across his fields, trophy
we called him red man,
color of Ares, gods
sacrificed on our altar,
his rivers run with his spirit.

I am white
bereft of color,
barren, a glare
a desert stripped of life.
It is I who wears
Cain's mark, plucked

the sweet taste fades
my lips are dry.

You are black
an amalgam, green
of the grasses in summer field,
orange of sun
singing an ocean
surf ablaze, blue
of a crystal sky
purple of robes
of Nubian kings,
brown of the soil
fertile and yielding.

from the garden

UNCLE KO'S THOUSAND LIVES

For Ko Un

BY MARTHA BATIZ

When no one expected his return anymore, when almost everyone believed he was already dead, he appeared out of nowhere at our door. He had always been slim, but now it seemed as if his skin were the only thing holding his bones in place. As if in that body of his there was neither blood nor muscles nor tendons, but just skeleton and hide inexplicably joined together. His eyes, larger than ever, welled up with tears when he saw me, but I did not recognize him. He scared me and I screamed, and Mother was about to push him away thinking he was a drifter, a madman. How could we have ever imagined it was Uncle Ko! When I finally hugged him, I could feel his vertebrae, his shoulder blades sticking out like rocks on a desert's plain. His body resembled the moonscape: there were craters, protuberances, changes in tone and texture that seemed to belong to a different world. He was wearing a very light cotton shirt, stained with dirt and dry blood, and his skin was cold. Humid and cold, like a frog's. The sun was about to set, it was breezy—and yet his hair did not respond to the wind's rhythm. It remained stiff. *What did they do to you?* I couldn't ask. Words tied themselves up in a knot in my stomach, tangled together with my anguish. I was afraid he'd lose his balance, I thought he was going to crumble; I just couldn't understand how those feet, whose bones seemed to compete against each other to see which one would be more visible, could keep him standing up.

Uncle Ko was a poet. Mother had told me that, ever since he was a child, he used to spend hours looking for new words to name beauty and fear, and that, more than creating rhyming patterns, he seemed to just find them lingering in the air at the very instant he needed them. When he started school, his teacher knew immediately that she would never have another pupil like Ko, and she convinced my grandparents to allow him to lose himself in the pages of every available book. Sickly and scrawny as he was, Grandma thought it was prudent to follow her advice and, while Mother helped around home, Ko read. He always carried a notebook, and in its pages he used up every possible inch of paper to rehearse images, similes, and metaphors. I know it for a fact because I actually have that notebook, the first one. The rest were burned the day they came to arrest him, but that first one was already hidden beneath a loose wooden board under my bed. I never tired of looking at it, of guessing the emotions that his calligraphy lay bare, of watching in awe how he sailed through language like someone who, after wading in furious waters, had finally arrived in a calm river and then, slowly, reached the sea. I know this, too, because when Uncle Ko realized that my hands were too clumsy for anything except holding a pen and using it to create worlds that turned around like his, he made me his apprentice. Right up until the day he was taken away. I was nine years old and I cried for many days after because the same night that I lost him, his notebooks and my notebooks also perished—consumed in the fire, together with all the books he had promised to let me read when I was older. A dark scar in the middle of our courtyard was

all that was left behind. That, and empty shelves and broken bookcases that Father did not dare repair, and which we discarded with the garbage in the following weeks. Nobody had explained to me that Uncle Ko's poems were considered a dangerous weapon. Who would have guessed? The foreigners who came to visit him always spoke highly of his work; they took with them copies of his writings to publish even in languages that we could not understand and, sometimes, they asked him to go on trips with them. Whenever Uncle Ko accepted their invitations, my sole consolation was to know that he would return to me supplied with new books and stories. Until the soldiers came and they turned the entire house upside down, and they tossed into the fire everything that was made of ink and paper and, in taking Uncle Ko away, they rendered both my afternoons and my hands mute.

Father went out searching for Uncle Ko in all the city's jails and in the hospitals, but his efforts were futile. Mother ultimately felt glad that Grandpa and Grandma were no longer alive, and therefore would not share her anguish, and the piercing pain of not knowing what had happened. After months of inquiries, of going from one office to the next always in vain, my parents gave up their search. I realized then that they were scared of talking about Uncle Ko. Later, however, fear transformed into either forgetfulness or custom, because hundreds of days went by without questions or tears. Until the afternoon when he returned.

Once inside the house, Uncle Ko asked for a cup of tea. Instead of sitting down, he remained standing up, looking around the room at length and then taking us in, one by one: Mother, Father, me—especially me—without haste, as if drinking us up with his gaze. He had lost several teeth, and the ones that remained were rotten, but the frank laughter that exploded in his face filled us with joy and curiosity.

"What are you laughing about?" Mother asked, trying to laugh as well, in spite of the tears with which she had been suddenly overcome. Her eyes changed for an instant and, if only fleetingly, I caught the look of the little girl who had grown up with Ko and who was glad to have him back, in whatever condition, but alive.

"I'm laughing at how well I remembered your nose, and your voice, and all the colours in this room."

None of us understood what he meant, but we smiled regardless. Mother helped him sit down in an armchair. His frog skin stretched instead of ripping, as I was expecting it would, and Uncle Ko then proceeded to drink his tea in absolute silence. We couldn't stop staring at him. We were anxious to pummel him with an avalanche of questions, but we did not dare. Finally, after a while, Uncle Ko pointed at the cup he was holding between his fingers and said:

"I was held in a place so dark that I couldn't even see the edge of a cup such as this."

We didn't know what to say, how to respond, until I followed my instinct and, guided by an impulse, I went to fetch him some paper and a pen. Uncle Ko took the pen in his fingers, as if first doubting its existence, and then, as if he had forgotten what it was used for. He spent a few minutes looking at it, and then caressing it before bringing it close to the paper. When he tried to write, his wrist betrayed him and he couldn't form even a

single letter. The pain that suddenly convulsed his face and deformed it told us what he had suffered.

Many weeks went by before Uncle Ko recovered his strength and asked me to help him write. That is how I found out that, in order to endure his confinement, he had consoled himself by evoking the features of every person he had ever met. And that he had made himself the promise, if he survived and was ever free again, of writing a poem about every person who had crossed his path. A poem, for example, about the woman who repaired used shoes. I knew her silver braids very well, and was acquainted with the vinegary smell of the curtains that hung from her shop window and also lingered on her clothes, but Uncle Ko revealed to me the coarse texture of her hands and the curve of her back in a way I had never seen before. Another poem—about the day in which he felt a faint ray of sunshine creep into his cell, a cell which faced north and was terribly cold — his daily darkness became even more cruel after that brief caress of light. Others, most of them, about those people whose screams he had heard in jail but whose faces he never saw. Sometimes he made me cry for the entire afternoon, but he kept insisting *Don't cry, my girl, write. Let us write...*

We worked together, in secrecy, when I came home from school and he from his wandering around the neighbourhood. If anyone asked about his poetry, he showed them his clumsy, stiff fingers. Nobody believed him dangerous anymore. We were careful. And, to avoid a repetition of his previous fate and the destruction of our work, I carefully hid page after page under the same loose wooden plank that had protected his notebook. We knew that nothing could be done with the poems until the regime fell, but that never discouraged us.

There are more than a thousand lives that Uncle Ko shared with me and left behind on paper, sung by his voice and transcribed by my hand during my late adolescence. More than a thousand are the pages that survived in hiding. And now that our country is at last free, it is only fair to liberate his poems from their lengthy imprisonment. Uncle Ko would have liked this book so much! That is why I am here today, standing in his place—I, who learned everything from him—, and here are these *Thousand Lives* to demand justice as only poetry can; to reveal those who went on living simple lives, and those who were condemned to darkness or killed, and to bring to life the memories that saved us — him from madness, and his people from oblivion.

BLOOD FOR THE TIN GOD

BY JAMES ONYEBUCHI NNAJI

The Red Machete is everywhere in the land of loss
Cutting down every tree that must bear fruits.

Soaked in blood for the tin god

The blood of the living and the dead.

My heart slit open a slim hope

Where love grows like elephant grass

Among the scattered rocks of the plateau.

Home has been murdered in me
And everywhere is now IDP's camp
Where children queue with empty plates in hands
Begging the whole world for a modicum of life.
Armed uniform men are counting census
With throng of cameramen.
After the burial of a bloodline
There will be declarations:
 Seven days curfew upon my soul
A blood-stained flag flaps at half-mast
In the unease of the wind.
Sirens of tinted-glass cars of officials
 For state visit and condolences
Bemoan the arrival of another truck-load of human barbecues.
We shall gather again in the village square, after covering the fire.
To celebrate a requiem mass
For those in the bush yet to be counted
And exhume buried dreams
Covered only by a shovelful of red earth
Where peace is buried on asylum
And place skeletons of those buried alive
Upon the laps of lost generations.

Word Idioms

BY YUAN CHANGMING

No art without startle
No belief without a lie
No business without sin
No character without an act
No coffee without a fee
No courage without rage
No culture without a cult
No Europe without a rope
No freedom without a reed
No friendship without an end
No infancy without fancy
No life without if
No nirvana without a van
No passage without a sage
No pharmacy without harm
No plant without a plan
No sight without a sigh

No splurge without urge
No spring without a ring
No substance without a stance
No think without ink
No truth without a rut

**TO SYRIAN CHILDREN
BY SONNET MONDAL**

You all are culpable — for wending your way to schools
for going to hospitals, for playing in open spaces and
for keeping at your dreams within a country in rags.
Yes, you never knew — you would be going down
with a fever that would burn your flesh into a universal
white fume — blooming in newspapers.
But, liven up the carcasses now. You wanted to be
in suits like Putin or Trump.
Look what have you ended up with —
a sweat of literate talks in a ground of experimentation.
The handsome presidents have osculated you goodbye.
Now burn yourselves completely, or they would light cigarettes
out of you — blaming you for the cancer rampant in air.
Don't let yourselves be counted — history will be framed without you.
Vanish with the fumes and transform into water
It would fulfil —
 your hope of staying away from fire
and your desire to wash blind eyes.
The unborn ones — please retreat to your mothers' wombs
The guns are shouting outside.
Wait till they have the ear to celebrate your first cry.

**GENDER AS A BONE
BY ADAM MAHOUT**

Two empty cages
looking for their nightingale;
words from which belief has flown
too late against the night of the world
hanging out toward me:
its immanent body suspended in emergency
across the burning precipice of sky—
my body, the symptom of its burning,
like a mirage swung open—

I am wedged
into these inaccessible earthworks
and pressed like an enormous question—
“merely to know and let you go”:
no body is a tragedy.

**THE WOMAN WHO HAD MANY NAMES
BY MUHAMMAD NASRULLAH KHAN**

“Deleir Khan has bought a new mare and a Bengali woman.” This news murmured through the square where villagers gathered to wag their tongues. People jostled and bustled, busier than on the holiest of holidays. Gossip was the only entertainment in my remote village. The favorite subjects were horses, dogs, and women. The latest juicy topic stirred their bored souls to life.

On my way home from school, I heard them chortling. Men spoke at the public places, and women addressed passersby from the doorways.

“Have you seen her? I hear she’s beautiful,” one woman clucked, holding a child in her arms.

“I saw her. She is a desirable beauty,” added another.

“You two harp on about her beauty, but what has it gotten her?” a third woman knotted her wrinkled hands and said, “Her looks have made her nothing but a slave. Bangladesh defamed Pakistan, and now this Bengali girl will malign our village. May Allah save us.” She drew a prayer symbol.

“Speak low. The Khans’ boy is coming,” one cautioned and nodded her head at me. A sly smile crawled across her face as I approached.

I listened intently but pretended indifference. They lowered their voices. I was twelve but my parents didn’t like my interest in the adult world. I guess the woman also doubted my innocence. Deleir was my uncle, so I was curious to know. I looked back after passing them, and they had resumed their animation.

Outside the mosque, at the center of the village, a group of graybeards sat under the wide-spread branches of a banyan tree. Heavy smoke plumes drifted from their hookahs, spiraling in the air. I heard much of what they said. Talk of Deleir Khan's libido filled through the smoke-laden air, as loud in my ears as their smoke was heavy in my nose. Had I been further away, I would've bet the banyan tree was on fire. To avoid them, I took a different route. I saw Bhola, the madman, sitting with his back to the mosque pillar. He raised his hand to stop me. I shuddered at seeing his jagged black fingernails, as the flies swarmed him like rotting fruit.

“What is that?” He pointed to the inscription on a wall.

“Allah’s the greatest.” I stammered.

“Yes, but beware of His men.” He put his hand down, allowing me to go. I picked up my pace until I reached the old brick street.

On the main street, I saw Ruboo riding the bullock cart. Old Man Ruboo, always gloomy and grumpy, was the most vocal of all. He stopped his cart at the front of a shop and

climbed down, shouting, "Deleir Khan needs to set a standard instead of fucking around with a Bengali woman." His controlled face of ugly disapproval would've frightened a wild pig.

Nasty jokes assaulted me as I hurried home. I passed two giggling girls who taunted me, "Hey, Mahi, congratulations on your new aunt—a Bengali aunt!"

Pushing through the front door of my home, I saw my mother sweeping.

I blurted, "Mother, is it true? Has uncle bought a Bengali woman?" I looked down at my feet, unable to meet her eyes.

"What?" Regaining her composure, she returned to sweeping. "Yes, your uncle has brought another wife home, that's all," she muttered and turned her face away, still blushing red.

So it was true, I had a new aunt! The thought of a Bengali aunt fascinated me. Determined to sneak a glance, I dashed toward the yard wall where a window provided a view of Uncle Deleir's house. Mother blocked my way. "Go to your room and do your homework," mother shouted.

I trailed off to the house and waited for father to return home.

The night grew colder, and I sat near the fireplace and gazed at the burning coals until late, watching the flames lick the brickwork. When father arrived, he sat quietly in his favorite chair. Perhaps he saw my hand tremble on the arm of the chair with my gaze fixed on the fireplace.

I gathered my courage to break the silence. "Baba, are wives for sale like animals?"

"Who told you that?" His voice felt sharper than any blade.

"Everyone in the village says Uncle Deleir has purchased a Bengali wife."

"Well, your uncle may need a woman to take care of his new mare. You know, animals bond with some people and can't live without them. I think this might be the case with your uncle's new horse." I wondered whether father was not ready to accept her as his sister-in-law.

He rose slowly, placed his hands on his hips and twisted side to side, and I heard his spine crunch like the pleasure of tired hands cracking knuckles. He walked to his bedroom, leaving me by the fireplace. I went to bed as well, but thoughts rushed through my head, driving sleep away. Uncle's dog barked at midnight. Either the mare or the woman had upset the dog.

In the morning, I lingered over my breakfast, and loitered in the doorway, trying to postpone my departure for school. Stories of my uncle would have spread like horses fleeing fire, and I dreaded confronting my schoolmates.

At school, boys approached with a lot of lewd teasing. I avoided them, but during lunch break that proved impossible. I stared at the ground as I ate, hoping they would go away.

"Mahi, your uncle is a womanizer, never happy with one woman," Lal, a senior student, said as he nudged me.

"Now, he's brought a Bengali woman, for a new taste, fresh from the city," Bakshu, Lal's friend, added.

“I guess it runs in your blood, boy. You look like a Bengali-woman type of guy yourself. Grow up fast. We want to hear your stories, too.” Lal laughed and strutted away with his gang. His laughter rang in my ears as he left.

The rest of the day was no better; I longed to go home. My heart pounded from shame. Uncle’s new wife was the talk of the school, from the classes to the washrooms.

Days passed, and still I hadn't met my new aunt. Life in the village fell back into its usual rhythm; the topic grew stale. My uncle soon moved her to a hut near the animal farm. A large Bokul tree shaded her hut which, with the arrival of spring, turned lush with tiny red fruit. The tree was home to a group of monkeys. She worked alone all day. No one referred to her by name. She was “The Bengali Woman.” She piqued my curiosity, but no one introduced us.

* * *

One sweltering summer morning, I saw my Bengali aunt leading uncle's mare, sheep, and goats out of his compound. Her black hair shone in the sun and waved in the slight breeze. Her dark clothes swathed like rags around bird-thin limbs. She was barefoot as she led the mare by the reins, yet she walked with grace.

Sheep were easy to lead. I knew them to be the most docile of creatures. But goats were another story. They reminded me of Old Man Ruboo, though not as ugly. The goats compliantly followed her. They trotted behind like faithful hounds instead of acting like the stubborn third cousins of mules.

There must be something special about this woman for her to have such an effect on the animals. I hurried to catch up.

When I got close, she looked down at me and asked, “Who are you?” Her gentle smile and musical voice made my heart beat faster. I had never seen such a woman in the village. Her dark eyes were radiant pools. I wanted to hug and welcome her, but formality forbade it.

“I'm Mahi, Deleir Khan's nephew.”

“So, my nephew, too.” She smiled as she walked away.

* * *

The school year ended, and summer vacation begun. Early one morning, I saw my new aunt leading the sheep to pasture. I noticed the dog that barked so furiously the first night now followed in obedience.

“Can I come with you, aunty?”

“Please do. I would welcome your company.” Her black eyes radiated warmth.

We strode from the village, towards the pastures. When we arrived, she opened her hand-woven mat and placed it under an old thick gum tree. The meadow extended up to the hills. The leaves sang melodies. She held out her hand and said, “Come and sit in the shade. Are you interested in horses?”

“A little. Do you know much about them?” I asked.

“Oh yes, I have a gift for getting along with most animals.”

Over the next hour, she taught me more about horses than I thought anyone could. I found myself smiling and nodding. The timbre of her voice made everything interesting.

I began to understand the secret of her success with animals. Even I would be helpless but to obey that musical voice.

“Aunt, what’s your name?”

“Laila.”

“Oh, I have a cousin named Laila! I didn't know it was popular among Bengalis, too!”

“That's not my birth name,” the aunt laughed, “your uncle gave it to me when he brought me here.”

Confused, I scrunched my brow. “What was it before my uncle named you?”

She paused, staring at my uncle’s mongrel. Her eyes glistened. “I've had many names. I don't think you'd understand even if I tell you.”

“I will. I’m no longer a child. I’m twelve years old.”

She looked at me with a bleak face. “I’ve had more than twelve names.”

She got up to help the dog deal with a stubborn goat. I'd heard uncle grumble about what he called ‘That worthless mongrel. Don't know why I even feed him.’ Yet now, after a few weeks with Aunt Laila, the worthless mongrel seemed to be a good sheepdog. The antics of the dog and goat made her laugh.

She returned with a beautiful mushroom in her hand. “You know it grows in wild soil. I’m like a mushroom.” Her voice was a whisper, her gaze soft and neutral. “It has no roots, no one owns it, and anyone can easily pick it. ”

She gave me the wild mushroom. “If you put it on the fire for a minute, it’ll be ready for you.” Her gentle smile encompassed her eyes.

From that day forward, I never missed an opportunity to spend time with Aunt Laila. I was getting older, so I could make my own decisions, and my parents were busy tending our crops.

Aunt Laila and I became good friends. We spent many hours sitting in the shade, watching the sheep and talking. I felt a comfort in her presence I'd never felt before. Her poise and serenity formed an aura about her that drew the animals and me as well.

“Why did you make them your friends?” I asked, pointing at the livestock.

“Because they aren't cruel. No hatred, no politics, no war and they don’t enslave their kin. Look at the dog, how he wags his old tail. Give him love, and in return, he’ll lick your feet.”

“But when we hate a person, we call him a dog or a bitch,” I replied.

“But some dogs still bite, “I said rubbing the old wound of a dog bite on my foot.

She smiled. “I wish all humans were more like dogs. They are simpler.”

“What about other animals?”

“All animals are better than humans. The more time you spend with them, the stronger the bond you form. Humans hate each other; they can’t live together for a long time.”

She called a young sheep over to us and stroked her wool.

“Soft, isn’t it?” said Aunt. “And what will we do with her? We will eat her to repay her for the love she has shown.”

The dog barked.

“A signal to go home,” Aunt sighed.

The dog led the flock homeward. We followed.

“Another day has gone.” Aunt looked toward the sun flickering like a dying candle.

* * *

One day, as we sat with the flock, I remembered everything she had told me on previous days.

"Auntie, please tell me more about your life. Why have you had so many names?"

She gazed toward a small solitary white cloud floating in the vast blue sky. Tears brimmed her eyes. She dabbed her face on a shirt corner and glanced away. "I'm sorry," she said.

“You don't need to be sorry. I made you cry.”

The tears continued, but she smiled and reached for my hands. She began her story in her quiet, musical voice.

“I'm a daughter of poverty. My memories are also poor, ones I don't want to keep, but they won't leave. I was born in a small Bangladesh village near Dhaka, then a part of Pakistan. My father often spoke of Karachi, a city far away, but full of opportunities. He worked for a man who grew jute while mother worked hard, too. Almost every day, we walked with her to the river where she'd wash our clothes by pounding them on rocks. Meanwhile, I watched over Mousa, my younger brother, to make sure he didn't go into the deep water. Sometimes, the jute would not grow because the rains had failed. Then, father would have no work, and my family would go hungry.”

“What happened next, Auntie?”

Regaining her composure, she wiped her eyes and resumed. “The summer I turned nine no rain fell, and father couldn't find work for months. We had bread now and then, and once a week, he'd somehow procure beans. But it was never enough.

“Then, Mousa became ill. Mother tried her best to feed and comfort him. I tried to make him laugh and made funny faces. He could barely keep his eyes open. I'm not even sure he could see me.”

She paused again to wipe once more at her cheeks.

“One morning, he couldn't breathe. I put my hand to his cheek. His skin was cold. It chilled me more than the early morning river. I screamed. My parents came running and tried to bring him back to life, but...” Her face twisted in agony.

“We had no money for a funeral. Father buried Mousa in the dry, rocky ground. Mother held me so tight. I was afraid of losing her. They each said a few words about how he would now be at peace in heaven. Our wails were enough to make the gods cry.”

Aunt Laila paused, as if continuing was too painful. But then she squeezed my shoulder and got up. She called out to the sheep, and we walked back to the village.

Neither of us broke the silence until we arrived. “If you wish, I'll tell you the rest of my story tomorrow.”

“I would be glad to hear it.”

I went to bed eager for the morning.

At dawn, I awakened to sheep bleating. Fearing that Aunt Laila had left me behind, I dashed out the door. I met her by the hill that formed a natural boundary between the pastures and the village.

“Your uncle told me that your parents object to you coming to the pasture with me. Perhaps they worry our friendship is becoming too close.”

“I’m able to choose my own friends. Besides, you are family. What could be wrong?” She mussed my hair and spread her mat under the towering gum tree where we usually sat.

“Aunt Laila, will you continue your story, please?”

She nodded. “Of course, just for you.” Aunt Laila closed her eyes and breathed deep. “Father had no work. One night, I heard him tell mother we would all die if we didn’t get out of that place. He told us about Karachi, a beautiful port city with lots of work. His cousin lived there who could find a job for Father. We started our journey from Dhaka to Karachi.”

She paused to collect herself, then continued. “We traveled on a cargo ship. It looked so small on the vast sea. We ate uncooked fish. Inside, the worst part was not the lifeless bodies rotting in the dark, or the buckets of urine stinging our eyes but the not knowing what waited for us at Karachi.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She didn't speak for a few minutes. She smoothed her skirt and began again in a clear voice. “We took almost a month to reach Karachi. Father found a job at an old house near the port. Food was plentiful, but we never forgot the ocean.

“Our newfound life didn't last. The movement to separate Bangladesh from Pakistan had spread hatred against Bengalis, and father lost his job. Hunger returned along with the spread of terror. Men murdered my father, mother, and cousin. But they spared me.”

“Oh, how terrible! How did you survive?” I asked.

My aunt closed her eyes and tilted her head. "By satisfying their lust." Her eyes opened again and drank in the blue sky as if trying to find her God.

“Since then, nothing's changed. The first man soon sold me, and I’ve been purchased many times. Every buyer gave me a new name, to make me seem unsullied, I guess. Now I’m a wife to your uncle, and I may be the wife of another before long.”

There was much I did not understand about the intricacies of adult relationships. But I knew that my beautiful Aunt Laila had been hungry and hurt.

A song of a cuckoo at some distance brought me back. A faint glimmer of light flickered on the horizon, consumed by the approaching darkness within two heartbeats. That was the time for the wolves to gather amidst the shrubs and make their collective howl. We walked back to the village.

* * *

A week later, I went to Uncle Deleir’s home for buttermilk. When I reached the front door, I heard voices coming from my uncle’s room. It sounded like my uncle was negotiating.

“Ten thousand rupees is my last offer. I bought her for fifteen thousand,” Uncle’s tone was firm.

“No, that is too much. She is no longer young,” the stranger replied.

I went to Aunt Laila's hut, but she wasn’t there. I searched everywhere. I returned to my Uncle’s room and peeped into a crack to see inside. I saw her squatted in the corner.

The man took money out of his pocket, wrapped in a piece of cloth and gave it to uncle, who counted each note.

Uncle rose from his chair, grabbed Aunt Laila by the arm, and shoved her toward the man. Her head was down and her hands were clasped as if in prayer. She said nothing. She simply kept her head bowed, inhaling deeply. When the business was finished, they walked out, with Aunt Laila trailing behind the stranger.

“Aunt Laila, are you leaving?” My tongue felt heavy in my mouth. I reached out and held her hands.

“I’m no longer Laila.”

The dog licked her feet, and she reached down to pet him. The stranger ordered the woman, now nameless again, to follow. She trailed behind him.

“Aunt Laila, please don’t go. You are Laila. You are Laila to me.” I sobbed.

Startled, she ran back to me, bowed to me, and spoke through tear, “I wish you a lifetime of wisdom and love.” Her lips pressed together as if it would hurt to smile. But she managed a smile for me, though her eyes spoke of sorrow yet to come. “Mahi, remember me,” she said. “I was your friend.”

“Hey bitch, come back,” the stranger shouted with a look of disgust.

She kissed my head and hurried back to him, then turned and waved again. Her hand hung like a dove suspended motionless on a frail tree. Her eyes hooded with fear and sorrow.

The villagers came out to watch Laila leave. She left without looking back. I watched her disappearing. Lost. Alone. Abandoned. No human tried to rescue her. Only the dog chased the stranger. He barked viciously as if to stir the people’s conscience.

The mare neighed. Her sound was different. It shrilled like a scream, but it was not enough to put the humans around me to shame. My heart yelled.

“She will die soon because now she’s the possession of a cruel man.” Ruboo, the old man, spoke.

"Die? When was she alive?" Bhola, the madman, cackled.

HOLDING THE VILLAGE ASHES

for the Rohingya people

BY IHRAF YOUTH FELLOW UMA MENON

Summer came; left on the same
scorched foot, covered in village
ashes; coughing fits. What is left
are a million minds, filled
with empty roofs; broken glass.
One million souls with just one
wish – too much, they say,
as the boat quietly drowns.
They use the oars to spoon salt

water, one more tongue to barely
keep alive. Money on walls,
money on drones, money not on
the village ashes. In the camp,
a child colors a picture – houses
on fire: red, orange, gold, blue –
all the colors that ashes are not.
When the monsoon falls over
the settled village ashes, the land
drinks; it drinks; it sinks
without feet.

**MY HEART IS LEFT WONDERING
BY STAR OKPEH**

My heart is left wondering today of all days,
“What language do they speak?”
The ones born deaf and dumb as a child.
Whose voice is unknown.
What language have they been taught to understand?
Do they just sit and stare like mounting mountains with nothing to tend?
In my upcoming autobiography of poems and stories I said, Life is a game of games.
A spreadsheet that leaves everyday hanging with answers and letters.

I wonder what it feels like to be silent for one day. How does the deaf speak to itself?
In what language?
Back then we would watch the drummers beat
The dancers dance
And the head of the king nod.
It wasn't the music that held us bound
No.
It was the unity of our minds..
That made the women want to wriggle their waists in remembrance of those days
Where the melodies were even sweeter.
Better than the taste of honey to wine.
We would wake to a Yellow sun
Kissing the mountains low.
Our mothers would ask us to drink the streams back home.
We never understood until the rivers began to grow and our limbs had to stretch beyond
their reach.

THOUGHTS ON SWALLOWING A BUTTERFLY
BY LYNN WHITE

Butterflies,
such a fragile incarnation
of what went before.
Warriors, according to the Mayans,
dead warriors ready
to be transformed,
transformed into butterflies.
Butterflies,
surely too fragile
to make warriors,
too easily destroyed
in their new metamorphosis.
But they can wait,
they can wait
for their next transformation
So take care if you swallow a butterfly.
Butterflies,
vigorous egg layers
that can reproduce themselves,
warriors,
mutating again to find
new ways to fight back,
to invade the invaders,
enslave the enslavers,
exploit
the new possibilities.
So take care if you swallow a butterfly.
And I can wait.
I have been waiting a long time
to see Henry Kissinger choke
on a butterfly.
I can wait.
Perhaps there's still hope
that the butterflies
will worm their way inside
and destroy them all.
I can wait.
So take care if you swallow a butterfly.

**IN THE TEMPLO COMPAÑÍA DE JESÚS IN OAXACA CITY
BY LISA LÓPEZ SMITH**

*no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled
means something more than journey.*

From “Home” by Warsan Shire

Don't do it,

I want to say with all the colonial
wisdom of my smooth border crossing
passported, educated practicality. After all,
I once walked in the dust and sun
of the Sonoran desert, berated
the walls, knelt at the crosses
of unknown remains &
learned just what the sun could do
to a body—rendered
unrecognizable in just one day. Before,
I dispensed rice & and beans &
slices of soap in the shelters,
there never were enough
size 28 waisted pants for all
the skinny boys there. I translated
for an asylum case for a man escaping the cartels
& the reports of all they could do to a body.

He stands there. I'm taking photos in a
church I've never seen before.
His baby daughter in her pink dress,
sparkly sandals, and serious smile.
“American Dream,” he says cheerfully in English,
in this place weeks of walking away from
the border. He stands
with his daughter—looking a lot like
all the other separated kids in detention,
their parents deported. Empty arms and
broken.

He picks her up, her curls bobbling.
“American Dream!”
But what is the cost
of crumbling dreams
between your fingers like

broken flowers. I want to say,
Don't do it. Yet,
I too pedaled my fortunes across
countries because I too left my homeland
to seek the life I wanted. And, I too
would put my children in a leaky raft
if home were a shark.

THE UNCLEAN PRAYER
BY MAEGHAN MARY SUZIK

This is not a poem for me.
Yes, it is my song,
but it is for all who heed a different voice.
For those who shake in their seats and have spinning clocks for brains!
For my sister who I wish to see that the world is more beautiful than the bottom of the
orange bottle.
And my best friend who sinks into the mirror though she only exists as the light that re-
flects off of it.
Consumed by an infinity to which there is no up or down, but only outward!
For tolerance and ignorance are vertical while acceptance and love are horizontal.

I scream for the delicious ice cream called education!
Because in the pit where my OCD left me cold,
I found a pen.
Ink ignites legislature and unifies lovers.
I ask you to listen to the words of all whose mind floats above their bodies
and urge you to dot the I's
and see through the burning castles.
Because I've got plans.
Sear-suckered Tony award in hand plans.
Get my Mama a beach house plans.
We've got dreams growing out of each pore like mystical flowers from a country built on
inspiration *not* fried food.
There is a to-do list bigger than the wage gap.
So I say to those who cannot see
and live in sticker boneyards from doctors visits:
You are not alone.
When the bed swallows the sunrise and sunset
Know that in the ground rattles a breath of fresh air and a new encyclopedia of self love
and self help and open heart resources will rise from the cinders.
Because we've all got plans.

**CONSOLATION FOR MORTALS
BY ELIEZER SOBEL**

This body flies through life
and settles in a pile of mud,
next to other piles of mud.

Or it is like a pot
fired in a kiln
then smashed against rocks,
the dust of tiny airborne particles.

The Parsis let vultures peck meat off
the bones of the dead, on rooftops,
until only pieces of bone remain.

These are all common occurrences,
but listen carefully, fearful mortal:
That form you call you that disappears
was never you.

No, you are the writer
of this poem.

(Elizer's piece was written in the Shalom/Salaam conference, April 14, 2019, in conjunction with the Muslim-Jewish Solidarity Committee, during the poetry workshop run by Muslim Writers Collective Boardmember Monna Sabouri.)

**POETRY IS MY OFFICIAL LANGUAGE OF MASS INSTRUCTION
BY MBIZO CHIRASHA**

IHRAF International Fellow 2019

Poetry is not a silent language.

It is the official language of literary activism.

Poets cannot be easily gagged especially with advent of digital literacy and internet revolution.

Poetry is a powerful medium of creative activism and human rights advocacy. We are all shaped, serenaded and entertained into maturation by sweet lullabies, drum beat sounds and birdsongs: True cousins of Poetry. Song and dance are verse in motion thus poetry remains a vehicle of freedom of expression and creative consciousness. It cannot be relegated to the peripheral pleats of human intellectuality but must be respected in every quest for freedom and struggle for human liberation.

Poetry weans us to realities and complexities of society as we are swayed everyday by rough political winds. It injects the penicillin of sanity into the corrupted blood of rat-brained devils and steel-hearted dictators. At least they might repent after sipping a bitter sweet verse or more.

The blunt-edged swords of my metaphor and razor sharp flesh slicing irony burrow stinging truth through banking malls scarred by poverty graffiti. It roasts and boils sandy paper souls of political demigods. It blisters the long fingers of gluttonous bureaucrats as it scalds them with hot holy waters of satire and imagery.

It is the language that fertilizes the baobab seeds of revolutions in our long journey to freedom. Poetry remains the literary sword of resistance through and through. Transcending from violence smitten favelas of Latina Americas to corruption creased streets of Black Africa. Napoleonic political set ups have been using art as a propaganda crank to effect segregation, intimidation and totalitarianism. The modern underground protest poet is now conscious of true and false revolutions. He or she refuses to be manipulated and then discarded into creative cemeteries like condom sheaths.

While today's world is haunted by turbulent times of warlordism, regionalism, super-power autocracy, political banditry, Islamophobia and xenophobia. The poet and his poetry are the masons of resistance and drills of mass consciousness.

Resilient voices have saved vulnerable nations from sinking.

For example, a few decades ago, Zimbabwe's harsh political twists, moral decadence and economic malaise helped in the birthing of underground poets and protest voices. Their crude literary art and satire of vitriol signaled abject poverty and dynastic tendencies of the ruling regime. *House of Hunger Poetry Slam* (founded in 2006) was a direct response to the moral crisis caused by dictatorial Mugabe regime.

The fervent regime of protest poets overthrew the degree'd old-guard literists. The old guard poets had lost the salt of expression due to fear and intimidation by the state. Most of them ended up as commissars of the failing but steel gloved Mugabe regime. Many had no choice but to succumb to profound silence for the purposes of their lives, careers and freedom.

The brave lot of new generation protest poets are adamant and vocal about the police state: Zimbabwe. They took their aim at post-liberation oppression, human rights abuses, police brutality and political violence as perpetuated by modern African leadership. Yesteryear poet's language was against colonialism, slavery, racial segregation and apartheid. During those brutal years, voices were vehemently thwarted.

Likewise, today African regimes gag, imprison, and plunder the freedoms and lives of resilient underground voices. Such experiences led me to create and curate the *Zimbabwe We Want Poetry Campaign*. It has since generated a *Global Poetry of Resistance Movement* speaking out against moral decadence, dictatorships, bad governance, abuse of human rights, gagging of freedom of expression through literary activism and resistance poetry.

I have led in the publication of poetry e-books, curatorship of a weekly poetry of resilience platforms the *Brave Voices Poetry Campaign* (miombopublishing.wordpress.com) and other platforms. I have turned Facebook into a Republic of Art for Peace, Literary

Activism and Protest Poetry through the active curatorship of pages, groups and timelines on Social Media.

The yesteryear literary guerrillas like Carlos Bvuma, Marechera, Mapanje, Chipasula, Soyinka, Neto, Anglou, Brutus and Hughes played their mammoth duties, fighting for freedoms of their generations and the future. Literary revolutionaries of their time. We can't afford to have our nations sinking into dungeons of banditry cabals and corruption cartels. We are indebted to use this official language of resistance, poetry. Even under all these depressing challenges of imprisonment, exile and intimidation, poets remain the people commissars and their poetry are weapons of mass instruction. Aluta Continua!!!

ANTHEM OF THE BLACK POET

BY MBIZO CHIRASHA

IHRAF International Fellow 2019

the succulent breast of mother africa oozes with the milk of black renaissance

the rich womb of africa germinates seeds of black consciousness

the black blood bubbles with identity of africanness

the sweat of my brows flows with the revolutions from slavery to independence

i am the black poet

i am the black poet

black valleys bloom with flowers of nehandaness

african horizons shine with the rays of nkurumahness

black streets coloured with rainbows of mandelaness

black soil creamed with the wisdom of mugabeness

black spears sharpened with the conscience of bikoness

i am the black poet

i sing of black culture bleaching in oceans of coca cola

i sing of black culture fried in cauldrons of floridization

i sing of black culture gambled in the dark streets of sunset hills

i sing of black culture burning in computer ages

i am the black poet

i sing of kings and their people

i sing of black kings and their people

i sing of the dead souls of black history

i sing of the rising spirits of black renaissance

i sing of the rising souls of black consciousness

i sing for the rising spirits of pan-africanness

BED-IN

BY RABBI ABIE INGBER

(Delivered at the *International Human Rights Art Festival's* "Celebration of Justice," November 16, 2018)

It is just three weeks since the horrific killing of Jews in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, and the hate motivated murder of two African Americans in a grocery store in Kentucky. Yet this evening we allow ourselves to come together and celebrate. But this is unlike any other celebration – this is a celebration of justice, a celebration of the dignity of all humankind, a celebration of life's greatest potential, a celebration of creativity. Let me ask you to just be still for a moment and dedicate our celebration to the lives that were taken just a few weeks ago.

SILENCE: May the memories of the righteous be for blessing. May we be even more resolutely inspired to pursue justice.

It is also almost exactly fifty years since I walked into room number 1742 of the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal, Canada. My visit there was not about celebration – it was a test. I wanted to know if poetic expression and music was genuine as a way to change the world, to heal the world. I walked into that bedroom to learn firsthand if the love and peace-filled anthems of the 1960s were genuine or if it was just a cover to produce hit records. The date was June 1, 1969, and the occupants of the hotel bedroom were John Lennon and Yoko Ono. I wanted to know if John just sang about peace and love and imagination or if he was genuine and singularly committed to the work ahead of him. John Lennon and Yoko Ono were staging a Love-in for peace and I walked into that bedroom as they recorded All We Are Saying is Give Peace a Chance. Yes, that bedroom, that Love-in and that song with Tommy Smothers and Timothy Leary and John and Yoko. I came away with that beat in my heart and with full knowledge that Giving Peace a Chance was John Lennon's marching order, and now it was mine.

I define my leadership and my life's passion by my devotion to the value of healing the world – the world which was the legacy given me by my parents, both survivors of the Holocaust of World War II. I stand before you not to tell you about the Holocaust of my parents' lives but of the import of their experience in my life, and the embrace they taught me of the words of the prophet Amos who spoke of - "Justice rolling down like waters, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream".

My friends, I came from a world where love triumphed over hatred, where dreams defined more than nightmares, and where goodness overcame evil. If I had two hearts, I could love with one and hate with the other, but God only gave me one heart and I choose to use it for love. In building trust around the world, I have been able to build bridges of understanding.

I must be honest though. I have neither healed the world nor significantly changed it. But in trying to do so, I have healed and changed myself. In every corner of this world, from the refugee camps of Darfur to the mountains of Ethiopia; from the killing fields of Eastern Europe to the safe houses for sexually abused young people in Kenya and Ugan-

da, I have captured stories and shared them, shared hugs and shone a spotlight on suffering. Story-telling was my art-form - the stories of others who in desperation had trusted me.

But I also inherited a love for fine art from my father - a love of art in all of its forms. Well into his late 70s my father sang and performed at senior citizens' homes and in 1997 he had a small part dancing with Olympia Dukakis in a comedy-drama movie, Never Too Late. My father taught me by example to appreciate quality art, and, if need be, to acquire it with small monthly payments. Life was too short to waste it on garbage.

It was both my parents together who taught me of the most genuine gifts that we can share with the world.

We give of ourselves when we give gifts of the mind: ideas, dreams, purposes, ideals, principles, and poetry. We give of ourselves when we give gifts of the spirit: prayer, vision, beauty, aspiration, hope, peace and faith. We give of ourselves when we give gifts of time: when we are minute builders of more appreciated living for others. We give of ourselves when we give the gift of words: encouragement, inspiration, guidance. These are our most precious gifts, and each person here tonight has a treasure chest from which to offer them.

(Adapted from Wilferd Peterson, Art of Giving, 1961)

Give peace a chance, give beauty, music, dance and art a chance, give yourselves the greatest gift.

CALIBRATED FOR GOODNESS

BY DR SARAH SAYEED

(Delivered at the *International Human Rights Art Festival's* "Celebration of Justice," November 16, 2018)

People come in and out of the doorway of our lives for reasons not always discernible to us. But they are always there as part of some wise, loving plan for our growth, even and perhaps especially when they bring us challenges or pain.

There is a verse in the Quran that says truly in hardship there is ease. Another verse also says the God is closer to us than our jugular vein. And that God is with us wherever we are.

Since God is in every experience with us, we are not alone. I am not alone. Life encounters serve a purpose of (re)calibrating our inner compass. When we feel burdened, a smile from a loved one, even a pretend smile on our own face can lighten the load.

When we are tipped towards grandiosity, false hopes or naiveté, disillusionment may walk in to help us back on course with a Reality beyond our line of sight. When we see darkness in one corner, light can shine from behind another. Anger has a place to remind us to guard our own boundaries and limits. A sense of purpose can seem to elude us, but that is just meant to be generative, to create a longing for authentic grounding. Loneliness hits and prompts us to seek out connection. We never dwell too long in any one state because we are constantly being renewed. Even depression lifts. With mindful attention, love, and compassion towards our own tender hearts, we can grow in aware-

ness of how to manage the ebb and flow of our states. This will also help us live with love and kindness towards others.

I have faith that each person is put here for a deeper purpose meant to harness our talents and gifts in the service of some greater Goodness. We may be washed out and wrung dry in the process but that's how we become reusable. It's up to me to keep my lenses clear, to have a steady gaze that sees myself and others in this light. When I falter and forget, I can count on God's wisdom to bring people and experiences into my life to guide me back to center.

A quote noted in my high school journal from the Velveteen Rabbit comes to mind:

"Real isn't how you are made" said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real."

This is a story about a stuffed animal that perhaps feels a little instrumentalized, like I also have felt on occasion- by people in my circles. But there is a deeper love that has emerged in my personal relationships over time, a love that makes me grateful to be part of humanity, in spite of all our failings. It moves me toward gratitude and forgiveness. I am now understanding that everything that happens is God's way of making me and us each of us Real, renewing us daily as a channel for Goodness, loving us into who we truly are.

DUBBS'S EXPERIENCE

BY DUBBS WEINBLATT

Dysphoria

is an unpredictable little bugger. It comes and goes and I never know when to expect it. It's uncomfortable, it's painful and quite honestly, it sucks. I don't feel it about my chest anymore but I do around my hips, my butt, my voice, etc. I never know when something is going to trigger it. One thing I've come to expect quite regularly is dysphoria around my period. To make light of this part about me and to make it feel a bit easier, I've nicknamed my period 'Pierpont'. It's fun to say with a British accent and that makes it one degree easier to deal with. "Oh, I believe Pierpont has arrived. And he's early, how RUDE!" The fun stops there.

An Ode to Pierpont

Once a month I'm reminded of the person I never was

Contracting uterus

There is no us

There's only you

Flowing like the tears from my eyes

Cramping my style

Shedding my dignity

Discharging my emotions

Blemishing my ideal

Swinging my mood

Aching my very core
Causing my anxiety to skyrocket
Going to the store
'These aren't for me' I think and want to say but
My lips stay stuck
I stay silent
It's a lie
A Super inconvenience
For my Regular life
Something that's hard to make Lite of
Some months are harder than others
Sometimes my body takes pity on me
Otherwise it's a heavy burden
Nothing feels sanitary
Nothing feels right
Who knew something so regular
Could feel so irregular

Changing

I am always so uncomfortable changing in the women's locker room but also don't feel comfortable going into the men's room either. I hate that this happened in NYC. I hate that this happened to Branson. I hate that it could happen to me. I hate that it could happen to anyone. If you've ever wondered why sometimes I'm uncomfortable with my shirt off in public places, here's a big reason.

They

Tonight while out with my cousin the server kept saying 'ladies' this and 'ladies' that and it was really bugging me. When I was in the bathroom my cousin asked the server to please stop using that word because I don't identify that way and it made me uncomfortable. Then the rest of the night the server said 'folks' instead and I felt seen and felt so much better.

Just got called 'sir' three different times and I'm just not that mad about it.

But more than anything else, back when I still stumbled over each "they," I realized that the tiny jolt I felt each time my mind readjusted was a miniature echo and essential reminder of the hundreds of instances of disrespect, discrimination, harassment, hatred and violence that transgender people experience every day. The minutes I wasted repeating my fragment of Gender and Language 101 were nothing compared with the burden placed on trans people to educate their families, friends, teachers, employers, landlords, policymakers and the rest of the world about their very personhood."

Top Surgery

Two years ago today I celebrated [#pride](#) by having [#topurgery](#). This surgery was/is life-changing. I've been the most happy, confident, authentic, connected person because I ac-

tually feel comfortable in who I am. I see MYSELF when I look in the mirror. Whoa! Everyone deserves that. I'm still learning about myself and growing and making mistakes and life is still hard but at least I can come at it from a baseline of happiness and contentness I'd never experienced in the first 31 years of my life.

I still get nervous to be in public without a shirt because people stare and my chest doesn't look exactly the way I want it to yet (sometimes it looks like I still have boobies!) but when I DO go in public or post on here, I'm consistently buoyed by my friends, family and community and it makes me feel safe and like a million bucks. I am so lucky.

So, thank you (for coming out 😊) and having my back and cheering me on. Love you all and Happy Pride

Order of Operations

Stare at my face/hair

Stare at my chest

Stare at my crotch

Give me a disgusted look

Lather, rinse, repeat. All day. Everyday.

Icky

I just got done showing my apartment to this person who made me feel very icky. I disclosed that I had top surgery and will walk around without a shirt on occasionally because I like to be open and also need to make sure that I will feel safe in my own home. I also talked about my day job which is teaching LGBTQ inclusion to Jewish professionals. I was then bombarded with 10K questions about terms and identity and was told I was "bold for attempting to try to change something that would never change. You're the minority...you can't create change. Why would people listen? You can't expect change." She challenged every piece of my identity, every part of my being and she did it in my own home. I wish I would have stopped it sooner but there was this small part of me that was curious to see what else she'd have the nerve say. She asked me about children and how they're taught when they're younger not to let strangers touch them and will that just go out the window? Obviously I answered that NO. Queer people ALSO talk about consent and what's appropriate etc etc and nothing about 'what's appropriate' changes just bc you're queer. SERIOUSLY!? We're HUMAN too! She said a lot of other things that were masked as 'curiosity' but really weren't; I am pretty aware of the difference by now. She was trying to prove me wrong. She was trying to prove my experience and my identity wrong. And it felt really bad.

I'm telling you this because I want you to understand that I deal with this shit on the daily and sometimes it's exhausting just to exist. And I'm telling you this bc I need welcoming and inclusive roommates and please send those people my way.

Thanks.

OBJECT IMPERMANENCE

BY KATHERINE DYE

A woman must continually watch herself.

John Berger

Is it "I" or eye? Choose one:

"I"/eye see the men in the street. They see me.

(If they look away,)

"I"/eye will disappear.

"I"/eye will never have existed.

"I"/eye am a figment to others and myself.

(My body is hollow flesh.)

"I"/eye exist forever

(in that moment between bloom and over ripeness.)

"I"/eye inhabit a brittle world

(before the spoken word.

My body becomes real.)

"I"/eye become object.

"I"/eye become me.

You speak and "I"/eye am you.

(Your eyes turn me into meat,)

while "I"/eye am my own butcher.

BROKEN BREAD SESTINA

BY MICHAELA ZELIE

My mother teaches me how to knead

the dough. With the heel

of her hands, her body lifting,

she teaches me that the body

"Is like pieces

Of a puzzle, two people, just fit."

She teaches me how to fit

the dough into the space above the fridge. "It needs

to rise," as she tucks a piece

of hair behind my ear. I push off my heels,

press my body

into hers. I ask to lift

the towel. She says "lifting

it too soon won't allow it rise." Its like trying to fit

the pieces

of myself into others without realizing I need-
to let myself heal
in between. My body
isn't meant to fit with everybody.
It's been ½ a decade now, of lifting
my body from mattresses, searching for heal-
ing, searching for something that fits.
½ a decade of need-
ing to find the right pieces.
2 years since someone forced pieces
of himself into my body
and since then I have need-
ed the control that comes with lifting
myself away from people who don't fit.
I haven't learned how to heal.
I have begun to think of heal-
ing as an unattainable peace.
I have begun to question if anything will ever fit
into this body
the way my mother said it should, in a way that lifts
me up rather than leaves me needing.
She couldn't teach me how to heal, or where my body fit
as easily as she could teach me how to knead or how to lift
the dough, break it into pieces, slide them into pans.