



*... done ...
... Vou. Savv. Couv...
... size jardou...
... H. faul*

Sunbi

*A collection of short stories and poems from the African Writers
Trust's creative writing programme produced in association with the
British Council*



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Preface

January 2013 saw the successful conclusion of the joint mentoring scheme between the African Writers Trust and the British Council Uganda. The programme, which paired emerging Ugandan writers with established UK based writers, lasted six months. During this period the mentees submitted short stories and poems and received critical feedback on their works via email.

The main objective of the programme was to challenge and inspire emerging writers and poets to produce good literature by focusing on professional writing development and offering practical creative writing guidance.

At the start of the project, we set out to fulfill two aims; to enable the mentees to develop a portfolio and to instill in them the confidence and skills to create convincing and potent writings. We also hoped for the scheme to culminate in an anthology of short stories and poems to showcase the mentees work. I am happy to report that nearly all the mentees involved in the programme, produced publishable short stories and poems and a selection of these are included in this anthology.

It gives me much pleasure and pride to announce that three writers from the scheme were offered places on the Caine Prize for African Writing annual writing workshop, which will be held in Uganda in April 2013. The mentees who will participate in this workshop were selected on the strength of their writing. I wish to take this opportunity to applaud them on this landmark achievement. I am confident that their participation in this prestigious workshop will further enrich their writing, and offer them more prospects in their writing and publishing careers.

At the African Writers Trust, our mission is to connect African writers in the Diaspora for a mutual sharing of skills and resources. One of the desired results of this mentoring scheme is to create an online support network between writers in Uganda and writers in the UK. In future, we plan to scale up this programme and replicate it in other African countries, especially where there is great need for writing skills development and the creation of writing and publishing opportunities for emerging writers.

I want to thank the British Council for this great partnership and for their strong belief in the development of African writers. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the mentors for their dedication to the mentees and the programme. My appreciation also goes to Ekene Oboko, who has worked tirelessly editing and putting this collection together. Lastly, but definitely by no means least, I would like to congratulate the mentees who have contributed to this stunning collection. The stories and poems are diverse and ambitious in their exploration and social observations of the multifaceted nature of the human condition and although many examine the darker aspects of contemporary reality, all the pieces are underpinned with the indefatigable force - 'subbi', that is hope in Luganda.

It is our hope that you enjoy this wonderful collection.

Goretti Kyomuhendo

Director, African Writers Trust

The Eye of Poetry

Lilian A. Aujo

Poetry is the school I will never graduate from
because no matter how hard – I try
I will never tell it all – the secret way of its patterns
And how the same letters form different syllables to form different words,
And how they fall – in front or behind one another, and if re-arranged would create a whole
different story...
It is how emotions run
High – Low – Calm – Serene
Vivacious, like the sun at noon, surreal like the fantasy it promises
You never know when poetry goes subtle or quiet. How even when there,
It grows deep like a river that bleeds
when the dry earth has sucked out her waters...poetry...

It is the bird song I cannot articulate
The trickle of the tap in a porcelain sink
The whoosh of the wind that makes my skin stand on end
That thing that knocks the breath out of my lungs
The music in you, unsung, yet so fervent you tingle within
The notes in the air unwritten on sheets. Tangible, intangible, whatever you please

It is useless to try to fathom how,
Without seeming to say much, it says so much,
How it clings to you like the little hand of a small child begging you to stay
Or, like the sticky filmy strands of the spider whose web you never see – but,
You walk right into anyway...

It is the sweet tangle between fantasy and realism
And metaphysics and apathy and breath and death
But do not worry if the opposites don't quite match or get criss-crossed right:
The rhythms do not always match...
see, there in disorder exists the same beauty eminent in order,
I have come to learn,
That free verse, sonnet, haiku, list, and lyrical when tweaked just right
Are like a violin in the hands of a skilled violinist: so many songs from the tip of one bow

I live, breathe, dream poetry, in syllables so sweet they tantalise my mind
Tie and untie my tongue so I have no choice but try to tell of its complexity,
Of all the stories that are spun like the silky strands of *Ananse's* tales
And the flighty cunning of a hare's escapades...
I laugh so hard tears kiss the corners of my eyes,
I learn lessons that might have remained unlearned had they been in plain black or white

See, the twists are new with every turn
Like a child's wheel let loose and thrashing through bushes
Like heavy raindrops never knowing their mark –
Like the water in a lake that flows in itself and never knows where it ends and or where it begins...
yes it is that meld...

...the sublime, the divine...that you never touch
Yet you know how it feels...
It is the beauty you want to explain but words are always inept to describe
It is poetry...existent in as many exquisite and intrinsic patterns
As there are on a peacock's tail:

*While she sits, her iridescent plumage dazzles us,
And when she fans her tail, we see her eye...
Hypnotically beautiful...spiralling into the magical chasm of poetry...
Do you see the eye of poetry?*

Getting Somewhere

Lilian A. Aujo

You are a boy of ten again. You are on the bus, and the trees seem to be going faster than the bus you are seated in. You are on the Kampala–Masaka Highway. You cannot wait to reach Kampala as it will be your first time there. The excitement darts through your body like grasshoppers jumping from grass blade to grass blade. You keep standing to catch a glimpse of the speeding trees, and then sitting down heavily onto your mother’s lap as if you are falling into a chair padded with cushions.

“But Vincent, why don’t you settle down?! You will even break my bones! Now see...” Your mother points down to the heavy lemon green sash of her *gomesi*. Its tassels are trailing on the bus floor, covered in red soil.

“You see how you have dirtied my *musipi*? You know *gomesis* are very hard to clean!” You look at her attire covered in bright greens, blues and oranges. *Mzee* bought it for her last Christmas. It is the newest of all her attires and that is why she has chosen to wear it for the journey to the big city.

“Sorry *Mama!*” You sit on her, as carefully as a butterfly perching on a flower and so that you remember to remain seated you cross your legs.

The bus stops at the roadside. A swarm of men balancing baskets of *gonja* race towards it, covering the bus’ windows. Your mother buys ten fingers for two hundred shillings. They are yellow and soft, but crusted brown in some places. As your mother hands you one, its aroma fills your nostrils. You open your mouth to sink your teeth into it, but the *gonja* disappears! You start to ask your mother about it, but stop because she is not there anymore. Yet, you are still on the bus.

You touch your chin and it is rough with a beard. You look down at your feet and they have grown so long. Your shorts are gone and you’re wearing trousers.

“Vinnie, Vinnie ...” It’s Chantal’s sweet voice. But she sounds so far off...You let her voice get carried away in the loud swish of the speeding trees...And you still have to find your mother...

You follow her through the narrow bus corridor and call out to her but she does not stop. You continue to follow her, until all the faces on the bus meld into a smooth blackness. But her bright *gomesi* creates a shining path for you and you keep going till you reach her and pull at it. But when she turns she is as still as stone and before you hear the villager mourners wail, “*Woowe, Woowe*”, you know there is not one breath left in her...

“*Maama, Maama...*”

“Vinnie, Vinnie! Wake up! It’s just a bad dream!”

You open your eyes. Chantal is staring down at you. “You were dreaming,” she says. Her voice soothes you. She strokes your ear and says, “Good morning, love?” She heard you whimpering like a puppy in agony. You turn away, you don’t want her to see the fear in your eyes. But she snuggles close to you and you have no choice but to kiss her. She is weak and yielding and you are no longer the scared twelve year old boy staring at your mother’s lifeless body.

The vibration of the telephone under your pillow tears you away from Chantal. Even as you pull away from her you wonder who could be calling you at six in the morning. Early morning calls usually convey very bad news. You wish the superstitious streak in you could be thwarted by reason. But your fingers tremble as you grip the cell phone. Quickly, you glance at the caller ID. It’s your father. At this time of the morning, what could be the matter?

“Hello, *Mzee?*”

“Hello *Mutabaani*, how is Kampala? How is work?”

“It is Ok. Is everything at home fine?”

“It would be Ok. But some things are not so good.”

Your heart pounds in your ears. “Has anyone died? Are the twins fine?”

“It is nothing like that, they are all fine. No one has died.”

Your breath comes out in a low whistle and it’s only then you realised that you’ve been holding it in.

“It is just that I had to catch you before you went to work, that is why I called so early.” He sounds apologetic and you are too relieved to blame him for giving you a scare.

“So what has happened?”

“*Netaaga obuyambi, mutabani.*”

Your father’s voice suddenly sounds small. You immediately know it’s about money. If he is asking you, he must have run out of options.

“Yes *Mzee*, what kind of help?” Damn! That only sounds like you are waiting for him to beg you for money. You wait for him to say something, but the silence between the lines stretches on.

“Yes *Mzee...*” You let your voice trail off like you are waiting for him to complete your thought, but you’re really thinking he will not become less of a father just because he is about to ask you for money. It works because he finally fills the space.

“*Nze mbade ngamba...*”

“Yes *Mzee...*”

“*Joel ne Genevieve, badayo kusomeero.*”

It has to be about that. Your siblings are going back to school. On more than one occasion, you have ‘topped up’ their school fees. Your father does the best he can. But he is a retired primary school teacher and does not have much income.

“How much is the balance?”

“*Millioni taano,*” your father says.

“Five million!” the shock in your voice rings out loud in your own ears; your father hears it too.

“*Naanti* my son, you know how things have been. The pension has still not yet come. Even if it had, it would not have made much of a difference. And the crop has been bad since last year; this banana wilt destroyed at least three quarters of the plantations.”

You shake your head. Five *ma*? Where are you going to get that much money? Chantal wraps her arms round your waist and puts her soft lips on your cheek in a silent peck. You know your father is up against the wall. Ten years into retirement and his pension is still held up because the social security official said he was not one and the same person – just because his name has two different spellings.

You know the banana wilt must be as bad as the Ministry of Agriculture had announced. There was an outbreak in the country, it spread easily and was hard to contain. It has eaten up many plantations in Masaka, *Mzee’s* being among.

But five million! Who is going to give you that much at such short notice? You could take a loan.

“When do you need the money?”

“By Friday, son. Joel and Genevieve will be reporting on Monday, and they’ll not be allowed to register unless they have paid full tuition.”

Today is Monday. You have only four days to get the money together, a loan approval would take more than a week. “Eeh! I wish you had told me earlier.”

“Our SACCO was supposed to lend me some money, but I just got the news that they can’t afford to lend so much money to one person when money is so scarce.”

The Savings and Credit Cooperative Organisation your father is referring to, is for the *matooke* plantation owners in Masaka. The credit crunch again. The heavily made-up news anchor on last night's news talked in detail on how banks and other financial institutions were lax to lend; deposits are few, so lending rates are high.

You stare at the light filtering in through the chink in the curtains. It's mocking you. You do not see even a sliver of hope to make this problem go away.

"So *Mzee*, let me see what to do, I will give you a call in one hour."

"*Weebale Mutaabani!*"

"*Mzee*, do not thank me yet, thank me when I get the money." Even as you say it, you know there is no hope of you getting that money in four days. You run your fingers over the black metallic rosary beads hanging from your neck. You never take it off. You never know when the Virgin Mary might intercede. "Hail Mary, full of grace..." you mumble under your breath. You extricate yourself from Chantal's grasp and start to throw off the covers.

"Can't you stay a little longer?" She purrs.

"It is six thirty, I don't want to be late for work." The words are thrown over your shoulders because you are already fastening your towel round your waist, heading for the bathroom.

"*Musiiru gwe! Wayigira wa okuvuga?*"

"What about you! Where did you learn how to drive?" You retort. The taxi driver looks at you like he would a stray dog and gears. The jolt of annoyance that has been bubbling in you simmers as you take in his dishevelled appearance. His head looks like a millet field after a ghastly downpour, the guy obviously thinks the existence of combs is a nuisance. His beard looks rough enough to shame Chantal's pumice stone. His shirt collar edges are frayed upwards, and there are little black holes sprinkled down its front – ash burns.

About two hundred metres away, the traffic policeman's uniform gleams white in your view. You think of pressing on in the right lane and allowing the taxi guy to fidget in the nonexistent third one till the traffic guy pulls him over. But you change your mind as you realise the errant driver will not give up. He has the nose of his mini bus pointing diagonally at the body of your Japanese Premeau; the blasted guy will scratch you if you insist. A long winded argument will ensure on who is right or who is wrong, and the traffic guy will come up and pull both of you over to 'negotiate' the terms of your offence and to decide who is liable for whose car's repairs. The digital clock on your dashboard is flashing 7:15 AM in neon green.

You step on the brake pedal long enough to let the taxi guy into your lane. The Prado behind you honks with impatience; everyone has somewhere to go this morning.

"Ki Vincent! You look like you didn't sleep at all! How is Chantal?" Gerald lowers his spectacles and stares at you in mock observation. You only shake your head and smile. "She is fine! But she isn't the reason I didn't sleep. Problems never end..." You stare at the blue-white logo of the company. The motto in bright blue seems to step off the cream walls of your small office: GET SOMEWHERE: INSURE WITH US.

"What problems now? A single guy like you should not have problems! Leave them to us who are married and have families to think about."

Although you are about the same age, Gerald is already married and has a five year old daughter.

“You know how it is; just because I’m not married doesn’t mean I don’t have responsibilities.”

“So how is *Mzee*?” Gerald asks. You have been friends for long and he knows how much your family means to you.

“He is fine. It is just that we need money; the twins are going for their last semester. By Friday, everything should be paid and *Mzee* does not have the money now. He asked me for five *ma*!”

“Five million! Hah! That is tight! How are you going to get that money in four days?”

You shake your head from side to side – you wish your mother was still alive, she always had a way of taking care of things – “I don’t know! Borrowing here and there I guess! Maybe you can lend me something...”

“My pockets are dry too! I just paid my daughter’s school fees. That ‘cheap’ nursery school is actually expensive. I wonder how much I will have paid by the time she gets to university!”

“You ask me! That five *ma* doesn’t even cover all their expenses! Education is so expensive, yet we earn so little.”

“I know! How many times have we thought of quitting this insurance thing for better jobs?”

You and Gerald are both graduates of social sciences. But somehow, you found jobs as sales executives at a local insurance firm.

“Maybe if the better jobs were there, we would actually quit,” you reply.

“But they’re not there! About the money, I doubt many people have much to spare. Since it’s the beginning of the school term, you should try Katumwa.”

“But he is a shark and his rates are through the roof!”

Katumwa is your colleague in accounts. To ‘get somewhere’ in life, he runs an ‘underground’ money lending business. He is not as bad as the other loan sharks around town. You have heard stories of people ‘getting’ fatal accidents because of failing to pay off their debts in time. But you have not heard anything bad about Katumwa. Then again, who knows?

“Maybe so, but he is your best bet,” Gerald says, “I don’t see any bank giving you that money at such short notice, and of course the other money lenders...”

“...I know,” you interrupt Gerald, “...they’re out of the question...they are more dangerous than a colleague, but still you never know...”

You are thinking that if you fail to pay up, Katumwa might send you to jail. But if you fail to find the money, that will be the end for the twins. A brief picture of your mother’s lifeless face flashes in front of your eyes. It is just like the last day you saw her in that coffin – the life seeped from her body, but her bright *gomesi* strangely vibrant and full of life. The twins were just two when she died. She might be helpless to help the twins, but you’re not.

“Too late to go to the bank now,” you repeat, as if you are thinking it for the first time. “Let me go see Katumwa, before the boss gets here.” You do not know when you started to think of Katumwa as the ‘Little Shark’. In a strange way the name comforts and fills you with dread at the same time.

“Do not forget the boss wants the field report and the returns on his desk,” Gerald adds.

“Yes, they’re almost ready,” you say as you shut the door to the small office you share with Gerald. As you go through the brightly lit corridor to Little Shark’s office, you touch the flash disk in your pocket – at least you have most of the work there, and another copy of it on your laptop at home.

You rap softly at his door, his office is at the end of the corridor. The joke round office is that Little Shark always has his ears peeled to a knock that needs ‘economic redemption’.

“Come in!” His shrill voice cuts through the door.

As you turn the silver door handle your grip slips because your hands are so clammy with sweat. You wipe your hands on the flanks of your trousers, and furtively look through the corridor hopping to God that no one has seen you feeling your buttocks at the threshold of Little Shark’s

door. You finally manage to turn the door handle with both hands. You walk in with the mind that the door is a minute trap door that will only reveal itself once you pay up.

“Good morning Katumwa, I need your help!”

“Vincent! First things first, you never come to see me! You only remember me in hard times, eh?”

You look at his short forearms supporting his burly face. How can such a small man have so much power? As if he is following your train of thought, Little Shark smiles and says, “How much do you need?”

“Five million.”

“That is Ok. When do you want it? You know the usual rate, right?”

“As soon as yesterday; ten percent, isn’t it?”

“My friend, if I lent at that rate, I would never get anywhere. You know the economy is tight, my rate is fourteen percent. Some other guys in the business are charging fifteen percent every month.”

“Over a hundred thousand a month? Katumwa, you will kill me!” Before your eyes, the light in his office dims. Manically, he raps his chubby fingers over the calculator keys.

“Let’s see...that is just about right; five hundred and twenty-five thousand shillings in three months.”

“In three months! That is so much...”

“...We can talk six months if you want...”

“Out of the question! So you can milk me for twice the amount?”

Not in the least bit offended, Little Shark chuckles, “It’s the times my friend, and this is business.”

You shake your head and touch your neck. The black beads of your rosary feel like a chokehold, “Fine. I’ll take it.”

He springs off his desk with a quickness that surprises you. For the first time you notice the steel safe mounted in the wall in the corner of the room. His chubby fingers deftly turn the knob for the combination. It’s like he knew you were coming. He takes out five bundles of fifty thousand notes. He walks over to the counting machine and runs it. It’s all there. He bands it and wraps it in hard khaki paper and tapes the edges. He hands you a grey box package.

“Good doing business with you,” Little Shark says.

You nod, thinking about the ride to the bank. As you reach the door, he is already bending over his notebook. You turn back to see what he is writing.

“There is a receipt for you of course,” he says as he opens a drawer on his left. He pulls out a receipt book and writes out one for you.

“The money is in your account, *Mzee*.” You are on phone with your father. It is three o’clock and you are exiting the bank.

“*Eeh! Weebale nnyo mutabaani!* Thank you very much son,” he repeats in English. “It is good to have a son who is somewhere, at least your brother and sister will not drop out, they will get somewhere too one day, not so *mutabaani*?”

“Yes *Mzee*, they will get somewhere too.”

As you hang up the phone, you wonder where that somewhere will be.

That Same Night

Elone N. Ainebyoona

That same night,
He picked me along the way.
He charmed me with his bundles.
He assured me of pleasure each day.
He took me around his castles.
He asked me to stay.

That same night,
I forgot about my pimples.
I only felt gay.
I could only feel my dimples.
I looked forward to his nightly play.

That same night,
His body moved like ripples.
His hands felt softer than clay.
His smooch gave me tickles.
His form warmer than an overlay.

That same night,
He began to sway.
He curved in like a sickle.
He shoved me away.
He chased me like trouble.
He denied me my pay,
He only gave me prickles.

That same night
I couldn't believe the betray,
I left in hustles.
I rushed for the subway.
I was all left a ramshackle,
I only had to pray.
I dreaded that one night.

The Gem and Your Dreams

Gloria Kembabazi Muhatane

You have probably noted your dreams down in a well decorated pad, in careful handwriting, one that you use only when it is something very important. You use a pen that was given to you as a gift or one that's unique from all the other pens. You feel that if you use rare materials to write your dreams down, the faster they will be realized. You tear the paper out of the notebook, fold it and keep it under your pillow, where no one but you and God - who will help you achieve those dreams - can see.

Sometimes, you get the paper out, and reading through it, you wonder, 'How will I ever achieve these dreams?' You are a man, and one of your dreams is to find the right woman who you will spend the rest of your life with. At some point in your life, you feel Karen is the right woman for you. But you know Karen will want to be with a successful man. A successful man is one who can make more money than his wife can spend.

You wonder how you are going to keep Karen. You remember you lied to her, told her that you had so much money, that your father was a minister, your mum a doctor and that your siblings lived in the United States - but you live with your auntie, have no siblings and you never knew your parents. The other items on the list are, building a mansion, buying a car - a 2000 model Nolan to be specific - running a few businesses and not having to work for anyone again in your life. All in all, your dreams need money to be obtained. How on earth will you find that money before Karen runs away with another man who is able to indulge her every whim?

You think of talking about your future plans with Karen. Maybe if she knows your ambitions, she might after all stay and support you. You call Karen on your *katorchi* phone and set a date with her, now, you're all geared up to talk to her about both your futures.

Your aunt's place is in Buwate, Najjera, though she is usually up-country on official duty. It's a two roomed self-contained house with a kitchen and living room, garlanded with different species of flowers placed inside cracked plastic buckets, running round the house near its green sadolin colored wall. Plants with tendrils emanate from the broken concrete on the verandah and cling onto the wall accompanied by ivy. On the inside, the floor is maroon in color with a few cracks peeping through. The living room is completely free of dust. There's a large wooden chair that seats three and two others that seat one. Their cushions are maroon and white, complementing the floor. A wooden yellowish table set stands in the middle of the room covered with hand knitted cloths, an empty flower vase sits on the main table. Pictures are stuck on the walls with tape which has been worn out by air over time.

You leave home dressed in the black trendy skinnies a buddy gave you and the red collared ill-fitting t-shirt you are fond of, which bears the words: I AM A BIG MAN. It's a good luck t-shirt even though it sustained an injury through a nail hanging on the wall in your room. You cover it up with a jacket, pick something under your pillow and place it in the jacket pocket. You fit your feet into the sandals you always leave by the doorstep, pluck the key from the inside and make sure you lock the house on your way out.

Twenty minutes pass while you're in a taxi and you find yourself at a cheap bar in Kiwatule. The bar - which has room for only ten people at any given time - holds an old black and white Panasonic TV that serves as the only entertainment. Judging from the bar's shelves, the drinks are as good as done. The light source is a blue bulb; its soft glow is responsible for the slim cosiness of the bar. To

your surprise, Karen is already there, sipping on a Sprite. She perceives an image of you, gets up to massage your body with a passionate cuddle that you've missed. You both get ensconced in the chairs. You waste no time in trying to achieve the main goal of the meeting.

'Hey baby, I have been meaning to talk to you about something'. You look down at the table and wonder how you are going to start.

'Hey, you're frightening me, is it something that could destroy us?' She is filled with consternation, her face is all crumpled. How are you going to make a clean breast of whatever you perjured before and at the same time tell her about your dreams?

'No, no, it's nothing to worry about. Everything is Ok.' You look at the relieved face of the beautiful woman seated across the table and suddenly you wondered how you'll be able to confess what a broke-ass you are?! But you have to say something, to cover up what you started.

'Honey, I have been meaning to tell you that you are the first of my dreams to be achieved.

You are glad something came out right, and you hope it will be taken right.

'Are you sure about that Sam?' She smiles that smile you always see whenever you close your eyes and think of her. 'Prove it!' she says. You're glad she actually asked you to prove it. Even more glad that you carried along with you the paper on which your dreams are written.

'Here, read here'. You show her the paper, folding it such a way that all your other dreams are covered and she'll only see the first one you wrote which is: *To find the woman of my dreams*. You even show her the date you wrote it which was almost a year ago.

'I now believe you, sugar', she smiles again and lifts her hands from her jeans wrapped thighs to rub her arms, making a cross on her chest; the way she does when she wants you to hold her. You move with your seat to be closer to her. You lift her off her chair and cuddle her. And you wish the evening would never end. But it's late, and she has to go home. Most lovers prefer to walk rather than use a *boda-boda*, especially when the distance is a short. You walk with your hand entwined in hers. You tell each other sweet nothings and before you know it, you have reached her doorstep. You peck her on the neck and say goodnight.

You head back home but this time you use a *boda-boda*. The distance being longer. When you arrive home the first thing you do is bang heavily on the door with your knuckles, as if it bears the fault for the lies you told Karen. In some way, you convince yourself that tomorrow you will find a way to start bringing those other dreams to fruition. The night is fairly peaceful.

The next day, it's a Friday. In the afternoon you set out to meet your buddy, Nicko. Nicko is a hustler; you know that he will find work for you. You board a taxi to Kisasi and you arrive at Nicko's in under ten minutes. He stays with his dad on the first floor of the famous five storey *Yellow Apartments*, separated from the murrum road by a large fence. The apartments have maintained their vivid color, despite the ever settling dust shuffled about by undecided winds.

'Hey, Nicko'. You shout out to him as soon as you walk through the gate. Nicko looks through the living room window to see who is calling him.

'Hey Sam, my man, t'sup ma boy'. He greets you as soon as he reaches for the door. You shake hands and knock shoulders. You follow him to the living room and before you can spell out your problems or sit in one of his battered chairs he says excitedly, 'Something has come up, you can't miss it.'

'What's that man? Fill your boy in.'

You are hoping it's a *kyeyo* of sorts as you squint at the environment. The apartment house is a mess; with dirty utensils under the table, you can hardly tell the original color of the paint on the walls, whether it's cream or brown as both shades are visible. There's a smell of something fermenting that you can't quite recognise, it's pinching your nose so you're being forced to stop breathing at certain intervals. Dust is a steadfast companion to the cupboard, also to the window

seals, the television set and all other appliances in the room. The room is stuffy, but you decide you can forgive Nicko's grubby nature.

'Guess who is throwing the par-ley tonight?' Nicko teases as he picks up a toothpick from the glass table and places it in his mouth. He starts chewing it easily, as if it were palatable.

'Dude, just tell me man. I'm not in guessing mood'. You're only in the mood for blue collar jobs. You sit and lean back in the sofa, losing your interest in his talk.

'I will save you the trouble,' Nicko says as he places one foot on the table, not minding his dirty sandals. He leans forward, stares keenly at you, before he says anything, so that he will not miss the expression on your face when he makes his revelation, 'The Nigerian billionaire is throwing a party at his mansion in Bugolobi and I managed to secure two invites'.

'Wha...what!?' You can't believe your luck. You get out of the chair, your hands in the air, your eyes wide and your mouth open, but no sound comes out. You're excited. Excited because people always talk about the rich man's mansion and in your imagination, it's paradise. And although you hadn't included it on your list, it is one of your dreams to be there. You are going to dine with all the rich people in the city; feel important for the first time in your life and also squint at the billionaire's daughter. You have heard she is extraordinarily attractive though in your heart, she can never be more beautiful than Karen.

You suddenly remember you don't have a proper outfit for the occasion.

'Haa, man, Nicko, what am I going to wear?' You know Nicko always has a way out.

'Ah, don't worry, man. You will dress up here. My old man usually keeps his suits ready to wear'.

Nicko's father is out of town for the weekend. He will definitely find a nice suit for you and him.

Evening falls and you have got to get ready. The function starts at eight that evening, but you would like to be there for seven.

'We better start getting ready,' Nicko says, 'but please take a shower before you wear my father's suit'.

You have to do what Nicko says, or else he might not give you his dad's suit. You realize though that you're without socks and shoes. You take the shower and you both get dressed. You are ready to go. But before you leave, Nicko notices how dirty the house is.

'Eh, man, will you help me clean this house tomorrow, man, *yo ma* boy you know?' He says, tilting his head to one side as each word pours out of his mouth.

'Yeah, yeah, it's cool, it's cool.' You know you are now a pawn on his chess board. You either say yes or start undressing. You leave the apartment, mount on one *boda-boda* and go to what for you is the party of your life.

You get to the gate and the *askari* gives you a mean look. You know the reason for his stare is because you didn't arrive in a chauffeured, shiny black car like most of the guests. But all the same, the invite will guarantee you VIP treatment. You are showed around paradise by a finely made-up girl, donning a knee length dark blue dress and silver stilettos. You can't believe how oversized the estate is. About three large gardens make up the front of the house. The girl leaves you at the first entrance where you are transported by a cart to a second one. A suited usher directs you to a high, marvel-paved art gallery to join the rest. Its walls are garlanded with high-ceilinged pillars in azure, scarlet and white. Cool, white statues of West African subjects stand in the rooms' four corners.

You immediately start admiring all the hangings on the walls. The portrait of his daughter created from multicoloured glass, one of him as a child made of wood. There is a Nigerian emblem made of shining metal. You stare at the accolades he has collected throughout his life, which are kept behind glass cupboards. You notice the water fountain in the middle of the room which seems to be keeping the room cool.

You continue walking around the room, looking at the same paintings and wondering if you hadn't seen them already. You notice many people's attention in one place and wonder what they are looking at. When you notice them leave, you go to have a look. You can't believe what you see. A gem!

You remember having seen it featured in the national newspaper's section, '*The Rich Men's Possessions*'. It's the flawless star ruby. It's red in color, medium dark tone about 15 carats in an oval cabochon cut. Its star shimmers over the surface of the stone and is visible when illuminated at an angle with a single light source. It has a strong fluorescence when exposed to ultra violet rays like those in sunlight and holds its vivid color under all lighting conditions. It has also been in the family for five generations and originated from Burma, now Myanmar. You recall it was worth almost \$50,000 or something in that range.

Of course you can't even convert that money in your head, but you know it's a whole lot of money. Then your mind drifts back to that paper you keep under your pillow and then to Karen!

Your conscience goes on a trip! All you think of is how to get the ruby from its glass case. You look around to see if anyone is watching you. You envision Nicko in one of the corners busy talking to an incredibly beautiful young lady, you decide it's the rich man's daughter and at that moment it doesn't matter. You look in all directions and notice that people are departing from the gallery through various exits. You now know it's safe and you open the case as your heart races, threatening to pierce through your chest, you pick up the ruby and fix it in the pockets of Nicko's father's trouser.

As you walk around the house, you remember a Nigerian movie you watched, where a young man steals a diamond ring from a jeweller's store, not knowing it had juju. The ring caused rapid deaths, bizarre illnesses and utter impoverishment in the young man's family, until he decided to take it back. But you know witchcraft cannot affect you unless you believe in it. You convince yourself that your prayers will be stronger than any juju the gem could possibly bear. You forget that you actually just stole something and God might not hear your prayers.

You don't even think about who will buy that gem, when all the news stations and newspapers throughout the country have already reported on the multi-dollar gem. Your body is frail, as if you are carrying a heavy boulder on your back. You lose interest in the party. You call Nicko and tell him, 'Man, I'm leaving, I will return your father's suit tomorrow and will help you clean the house'. Nicko can hardly understand why you have to leave so suddenly when the party has hardly started, but what matters more to him at that moment is basking in the aura of the billionaire's daughter.

You walk successfully past all the three exits leading outside. You walk to the gate and smile at the *askaris*, knowing it's the right thing to do since it shows appreciation for their work. And before you know it, your arms are behind your back, you feel chilly metal hug your wrists! Two heavily bodied men are holding your shoulders tight on both sides and they're not saying a single word. You kick about with your legs but there is no way you can brush them off of you. Instead, the heavy bouncer puts Nicko's father's coat through the shredder as he gets a better grip of you. You are dumbfounded, but you are sure it has something to do with the ruby, its juju perhaps - in fact most definitely. You are taken back to the house and embarrassed in front of the guests. You are asked who you came with and you point at Nicko.

Nicko looks behind him only to see the wall - so it is definitely him being singled out 'What! I don't even know that man'. Nicko denies you, his boy. The sirens come closing in and you're scared for your life. You are pushed out of the house and dumped into the back of a double cabin vehicle like garbage. Your boy, Nicko, is only worried about his father's suit and how he will tidy up his house alone, not whether you will rot in jail.

The gem and your dreams are gone. Karen is gone!

The vehicle drives off at high speed as if it were carrying cash in transit, most definitely heading to Luzira maximum prison considering it's the nearest to the vicinity. And you're right. The vehicle stops moving and you are picked up by your wrists which are still behind your back. The physical pain and worry about ruining Nicko's father's suit is nothing compared to the thought that Karen is already in another man's embrace.

You are pushed into a three walled unpainted cubicle with a single metallic door, a wooden bench in one corner and old newspaper cuttings rest uncomfortably on the walls. The door slams behind you, you fold your mighty thieving right hand into a fist that you ram into the walls and hiss through false teeth like a puff adder, 'I'll get out of here, damn it.'

Depression sets in as you try to deal with reality. Denial follows. You convince yourself it will only be a matter of time, maybe a week and then you will be set free. You put off the coat and place it on the bench. You affix your hands to Nicko's father's trouser pockets trying to analyze your situation in your mind and bang! The gem is still in the pockets. You wonder who is fooling who! You? Them? *Juju*? You are excited but fearful also. 'Does it matter anyway?' You ask yourself. You are locked in a cell, neither you nor the gem has a sense of freedom at the moment.

You move to the door that was harshly slammed behind you and wrap both your hands on its bars still trying to deal with reality. A certain electrifying feeling runs through your whole body instantly, exerting such a force on the heavy metals bars that the door lets off a cry. You stare thunderstruck - the door completely wide open. Freedom?! 'Who's fooling who?'

Perhaps your dreams are not ruined after all!

Hash Tag

Davina Kawuma

Headphones edged with brio,
bulging over skirted sofas.
Sport is the new sex.
Dogs versus coyotes on the tight
end of the stereo.
Hazard lights stitch footsubishis and TV
chicken into seams of Nokia eleven hundred housing.
In loose sprays, cracked for patches
of grey I save English names one cocktail
at a time. Tusky Big Brother Africa house
mates sniff my lemon bracts. I'm middle
middle-class with a chance of un | dress
codes. Raglan sleeves, push-up bras, harem
culottes, wine-glass heels and a backpack full
of silence. I will never wear myself out
trying to get rich.

Hash Tag, YouCantThreatenThePoor

How about it, then?
Shall I serve a late helping of morning;
slop poached pinks and yolky yellows
onto thick slices of doughy landscape?
Shall I take the day off and a bus buried
by a loud pedal to a faded scrawl?
Invite your size-six Adam's apple to my capacity
building workshop?
Shall I slaughter a mannequin?
Upload the video on YouTube?—YouGroup?—YouThink?
YouCome?—YouGrab?—YouCantOrderFrenchFriesWithThat?
Shall I read you some bumper sticker advice,
im | press you with my flaky fonts and American't accent?
Save you fifty on a bootlegged DVD?

Hash Tag, TheSystemIsStupid

In the Plantation

Oyet Sisto Ocen

I still recall its sweetness when he gave it to us. Uncle Tom found us playing in the banana plantations. We were searching for *nseene*, the grasshopper which appeared seasonally when it rained in our village. We searched for them on the ground and in the folds of the banana leaves. The first time we tasted it was when aunt brought it back from Kampala, “Nakato and Kato come and get some sweets,” she’d cried. We were plucking the legs and wings off *nseene* in the backyard of our grass-thatched hut. The sweets were different colours. I unwrapped the white *vuvera*, polythene paper, from one and threw it in my mouth. I felt the sticky honey sweetness fill my mouth and I swallowed.

We ran past Joe’s house to reach Katumba’s house so that he could taste the *nseene*. Kato was panting. We wanted to tell Katumba the news quickly and run back home. Mummy didn’t want us playing with Katumba. She said he had bad manners; he liked playing with his male part in front of us.

“Katumba, our aunt came from Kampala,” Kato told him, from the cool shade where he was seated. He was plucking the wings and the legs of *nseene*. The wind was blowing the bananas leaves lightly, swaying them from side to side. “She brought for us some sweet.” Katumba dropped the saucepan he was holding. Kato broke the sweet, which looked like a small stone, into two halves with his teeth and gave one to Katumba, “Eat.”

They had been good friends in spite of mummy’s restriction. Katumba threw his half into his mouth. Then he opened his mouth, his lips moulded, formed to look like a hallway. He was missing two lower teeth which left a path for us to see his tongue rotating. It made us laugh.

“It’s sweet, like ripe banana,” said Katumba laughing.

“Yes, Aunt Janet said it makes children’s teeth grow,” said Kato.

When Katumba heard this he started rubbing a small remnant of the sweet on his pink gums which made us laugh more. We ran through the long trail of the banana plantation which connected our home with that of Katumba’s. It was owned by Mr. Mukasa the old man. He planted oranges and pawpaw trees at the side of his plantation. We always stole from his trees when we emptied our fruit trees. Mummy didn’t encourage stealing so we only did it when she was away.

When we reached home, we found aunt was telling mummy about the city. She told mummy that Uncle Tom’s business had made him one of the richest men in the city. He had so much money he could buy the whole village and its contents.

That morning aunt brought out the metal she brought from the city. It was for piercing ears. Aunt insisted for our ears to be pierced so that we did not fall prey to child sacrifices. But daddy was against the piercing of the boys’ ears, he said it made them look like rouges. So aunt and mummy pierced my ears and not Kato’s. It was painful, but aunt said when it heals, I would put on glittering earrings which would dangle to my shoulders which would make me look beautiful.

When Katumba and Joe came home, we sneaked into Mr. Mukasa’s plantation to steal some pawpaw. After getting the pawpaw, we ran to our backyard, where no one would see us. The plantation was situated by the road which ran from our village to the school we attended – it was the same road that aunt used to come from Kampala. In our playground, we would sit for hours competing with each other to see who could throw stones the furthest. Sometimes we would fight over something small. We would then reconvene in the same place. In the playground we would

dream of becoming somebody big in future. Kato dreamt of becoming president, Joe dreamt of becoming a driver, Katumba, the head teacher of our school. I too, dreamt of teaching in our school, I wanted to be a class mistress and wear transparent spectacles like Miss John our class teacher.

Uncle Tom came down that road. He waved, beckoning us to come over. We ran in his direction. We were already imagining what he might give us. When we reached his car, he pulled the sweets from the black *vuvera* and gave it to us. We were very happy and we began eating the sweets immediately. He drove off and we ran after his car. He lowered his panel and gave something to the men who were playing cards in the shade. He left them cheering, ‘*mukulu, mukulu*, big man, big man.’ We kept on running after him until he disappeared down the village where we couldn’t see him. We stood there watching the dust raised by his car. Katumba said the smell produced by the car was very nice and he felt like eating it with bread.

When we were coming back from school the next day, we followed the marks left by Uncle Tom’s car tyres. Katumba and I were on the right side, while Joe was on the left. Kato didn’t come to school that day, he was not feeling well. Mummy decided to leave him at home and went to tend the garden. We missed his company on our way back. But we kept on playing as usual. Reaching our backyard, Katumba saw something red mixed in with the sand.

“It’s blood,” he said.

“No, that is Mr. Mukasa’s pawpaw,” said Joe and we laughed.

“My mum has cooked chicken today,” I said.

In that same spot, our lovely playing ground, whenever mummy wanted to prepare chicken soup, she slaughtered the chicken there. She was skilled at it. She stepped on the chicken’s wings with her feet then on the legs of the chicken with the other, holding the knife with her right hand and the head of the chicken with her left. She sliced the neck of the chicken with one stroke. Then she let the chicken fly headless and it flapped about repeatedly, blood jetting from its neck. Kato and I would stand there watching the chicken struggle until it stopped and mummy would submerge it in hot water and pluck its feathers.

When we returned to the compound we found people had gathered. Every space in the compound was occupied. Men sat in silence with their heads bent. Most women were inside, tears flowed from their eyes. One voice came from inside the house. It was a familiar voice to me. I squeezed through the bodies and rushed to the door, I wanted to see mummy and ask her why people were everywhere in our compound. But the doorway was congested; I could not access the house. Aunt came and carried me from the door and went with me to the edge of the compound, she was crying. I put my fingers into my mouth and could not ask her what had happened. I imagined mummy and daddy were no more and decided I would find Uncle Tom and beg him to take Kato and me with him to the city, for I could not stay without mummy and daddy in this village. In the distance I saw Mr. Mukasa coming to join the crowd. His face looked like he was either laughing or crying, I couldn’t tell which. He was stooped over with one hand on his waist, while the other held his walking stick. It was the posture Kato liked imitating when we played.

“It is Kato,” aunt said amidst tears. I looked into her eyes to make her tell me what had happened to Kato, but she bent down her head and I felt warm tears on my arms.

“Where is Kato?” I asked aunt.

“His head has gone.”

The head, I spoke to myself. What has happen to his head? And why should he accept his head to go and leave him. What is aunt saying now, she should be clear. “Kato’s head has gone”. What does this mean?

Then I heard aunt whispering amidst the crying; “I wished your father had agreed.” She sobbed. My eyes were filled with tears, but I didn’t know why I was crying. Perhaps I was crying because

aunt was crying? What she told me shouldn't have made me cry. If Kato's head had gone, it would come back. It would find Kato and fix itself, we would still run in that long trail of the banana plantations, we would meet Joe and Katumba, probably we would still plan to go and steal the pawpaw from Mr. Mukasa's plantation and eat in our backyard.

When I opened my eyes, tears fell down. I saw that Joe and Katumba were still standing along the road near our compound; they had not gone home since we came from school. Aunt continued crying.

"I knew your dad was wrong, he should have allowed the piercing."

She explained that when she was in Kampala; she saw many posters warning parents to protect their children from the witches who hunt children for sacrifices. The witches believed when a human is sacrificed, a big sum of money would be acquired to boost their business. I became confused with what aunt was talking about, that's when she finally told me - Kato had been killed. My brain shut down after hearing that. I was seeing everybody as a distant mist. I tried to slide down from aunt, I wanted to roll down and cry, but she held me tight.

For two days, mummy and I didn't say a word to each other. I wanted to say something to break the silence which had descended on us like unexpected rains. I wanted to tell her that Uncle Tom had been giving us sweets whenever he came from Kampala, but I didn't know how to say it. I wanted to confess to her about the time we followed the marks from Uncle Tom's car tyres when we were coming from school. However, no matter my desire to speak to her, I couldn't break the silence between us.

When I looked at her, I thought of the way she had slaughtered the chicken over Christmas. How when she had cut its neck, it still flew high in the air. How Kato and I laughed at it while blood was jetting from its severed neck. I was almost laughing at that image again. But when I thought that that same knife may have been used to slice through Kato's neck, something came like strange wind and blocked my throat. I was breathless. Invisible hands were squeezing my throat so that tears could flow from my eyes and roll onto my cheeks. When I cried, mummy screamed like she was mad.

One day Joe and Katumba came to see me. Since Kato's head went, I hadn't played with them. I stayed with mummy most of the time watching her flowing tears as she cried silently. Only when aunt was around would she talk in a low voice.

"Daddy said it was Uncle Tom who did it," said Joe.

"I don't know," I said.

"He might have given Kato some sweet for buying his head," said Katumba.

"Dad said police got him several times doing the same thing, but always he gets away. He told me not to respond when a stranger calls me."

"But Uncle Tom is not a stranger."

"He is. He does not live in this village anymore, he only comes to hunt for small penises like yours to be taken to the witch."

"That is why he is rich?"

"Yes, he deals in children's head and penises."

I thought about what the two boys said. God knows what they were talking about. I was seated listening to them. I pictured mummy's face since the death of Kato, how she would bend over a bunch of *matoke* for hours before she could pick one and peel.

"What if he gives us sweets again like last time, should we take them?"

"Ha, you joke, your big head with the missing teeth will go and make money for somebody. Even that penis you always play with, perhaps with all the testicles." Katumba laughed.

Their words were unbearable. At the age of six, Katumba did not know when he was being insensitive. His words drove me away I couldn't stay with them anymore. I went to the plantation and sat near a cluster of banana trees, where we had all played since we were three with Kato. We had imagined why bananas gave birth from their roots, why it does not germinate and why the tree is cut down once it bears fruit. I sat there wondering whether I would see Kato again, if the money his head would make would come to mummy as well. Hearing Katumba and Joe faintly, I started singing a song, which I have never known before. And the song didn't come to my tongue in sound; it remained in my heart, song of a missing beloved brother! When I came back, I found the two boys were still talking.

"Nakato, don't cry, dad will bring some sweets today. I will give you some."

"I no longer eat sweet Joe," I said.

"Uncle Tom will be caught and killed," said Katumba.

"I don't care, that will not bring back Kato."

The two boys remained silent. The wind stopped blowing the banana leaves. My heart was a public drum, beating loudly with longing. One *nsenene* leapt up before it went down again. I remembered that day Katumba was plucking off the head of *nsenenes* with ease before putting them in the saucepan. Could Kato have turned into *nsenene* in Uncle Tom's hands and then his head plucked off with ease or he could have changed into that chicken that we enjoyed on Christmas Day? In this plantation, do children sometimes change into chicken or *nsenene*?

"But why don't they stop him?" asked Joe.

I heard Katumba laughing before he said, "They will stop him one day if they get him."

"When is that one day, tomorrow?" I asked.

"I don't know, but one day."

My worry was mummy, she could cry the whole day. Daddy travelled to the city almost every day and I didn't know why he was going so often. Could he still be looking for Kato? I didn't know. I wish dad could bring Kato back. I wish the lobe of earth that I threw without looking into the pit could bring back his head and bind it back to his neck. If dad's frequent going to the city was with the hope of finding him again, that would be good news for me, even Joe and Katumba would celebrate with me. But when dad spoke faintly to mummy in low voice, my hope vanished. When I heard a sob in mummy's voice, I cried. When I heard dad telling mummy that Uncle Tom was caught with a sack and blood in his car and that was not enough evidence, I didn't know what to think. I coiled there on my lonely bed. The space left by Kato's death was very big, we had been together in the womb as twins - this new space was unbearable.

Mummy told daddy to leave everything. But dad insisted he would still go back. He would pay the money which the policemen said would act like a stone – anchoring Kato's file so that it is not 'blown by the wind' as they investigated the case. He would give the money for bringing Uncle Tom back to the prison, since the time he was captured, he left to urinate and didn't come back. He would want to see the witch doctor who confessed that he dealt with Uncle Tom, but was rubbished by the police as being insane.

I wanted to open my eyes and see, but the night was so dark. It was blinding. The night was long. I could hear the conversation of Katumba and Joe coming to my ears faintly. They kept me awake in bed. When morning approached, mummy's face was heavy. I had to look for the company of Katumba and Joe. Much as their words made me uncomfortable, at least they gave me company. Although Joe was only two years older than Katumba, he spoke much more maturely.

When I was with Joe and Katumba, I forgot my problems a bit. Katumba advised us to go and get some pawpaw from Mr. Mukasa's plantation. We sneaked in. Mr. Mukasa was busy inside his hut; he only greeted us with the white smoke on top of his hut. Katumba picked one ripe pawpaw. We

moved farther into the middle of the plantation where the banana leaves wouldn't give way to sunlight. It was very dark, but we loved it. We were getting accustomed to darkness in our village. When we cleared ground, we uncovered the banana leaves which were softened by moisture and covering the place. We sat down, Katumba cut the pawpaw. We ate while giggling. Joe stood up, we saw his leg going down into the earth, he pulled it out and he told us to run. Though I didn't know why, I started running after him because I always believed in Joe. Katumba remained, laughing at us.

"Why are you running?" he said.

I stopped and looked at him. "Come we go, let's leave this place, it's so dark." Joe didn't talk, he was just running ahead. I saw Katumba kneeling down near the place where Joe's leg had sunk.

"There might be ripe bananas inside."

He started scooping the soil with his hands and throwing it behind him. I went back and stood near him watching. Joe stood the furthest away from us. Katumba continued until he saw a sack, that confirmed his thinking. Mr. Mukasa had buried bananas there. When he scrubbed all the soil from the sack, he removed it at once, expecting to see the yellow bananas. He jumped abruptly to his feet. Looking at me, I saw his eyes open wide, his eyeballs dilating.

Joe came near me. We moved toward Katumba together to see what he was seeing. Without a word, we began running. We ran, when we stopped somewhere to catch some breath, Katumba said, "His head is alive."

"I...I don't know," said Joe.

"It is true Joe; he was looking at me when I removed the sack."

"Go...go and...and you call, let him out and we'll go home." He started running again. Katumba followed Joe and me. It was horrible, more than anything I have ever seen. I didn't expect to see Kato's head. Truly Kato was alive. His eyes were open. *He was seeing*, I whispered. *He was clearly seeing, only that he can't talk. His voice cannot be heard, now. Kato was seeing, but his voice.* I kept on saying things which I didn't know to myself as we ran toward Mr. Mukasa's hut; we needed somebody to help us.

The last thing we saw was the big silver cross which fell from the sack.

"That cross he is putting on, we can also put on," huffed Joe as we were running.

"Yes, we can all put on." I said, not knowing exactly what I was saying.

"I hope he cried, before he was killed," said Joe.

"Maybe."

"If someone had heard they could have helped him."

"Kato's voice was small, no one could hear. And this place is very dark, we are in the plantation, no one will ever see this."

Katumba was running very fast ahead of us, we saw him entering inside Mr. Mukasa's house. We rushed after him; when we reached the door he was coming out of the room. He told us he had seen blood in the bottle in Mr. Mukasa's house. Before we could ask him, he started running again. We followed him before I branched and ran straight home.

When I reached home, dad was sitting at the door. I didn't know what I told him. But I heard him saying, "I will go and pick it." I didn't know which one he meant, the head or the bottle. I couldn't imagine dad holding Kato's head.

I rolled in my bed and closed my eyes tight so I would not see Kato's head in my mind. When I imagined Mr. Mukasa and Uncle Tom squeezing blood from Kato's head, I bit the blanket. I wanted to climb on top of the hut and throw myself down. I lay on the bed waiting to see what dad would bring. And I kept on whispering, *Dad will fix back Kato's head and we shall be together again.*

Pre-Naivasha Days

Emmanuel Monychol

We used to fight flies and heat
In the bullet ridden grass thatched huts,
We lived in the hope of milk and honey.
We tried to share the little we got with guerrilla forces
Who lived in hope too and tried
To survive with little or no food and water
Tyre sandals for shoes and old clothes looted or donated.

The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement united us.
Yes! We were united: together, Army and ordinary Citizens.
We decorated our bodies with ostrich feathers;
We danced and smiled, we laughed and celebrated
Together, we ate, together we drank,
Together we poured libations to bless the spirits
Of the fallen heroes buried or abandoned.

The Guerrilla Generals-turned-Politicians
Cruised the V-8 vehicles in our new dustbowl
They swim amidst ill-hooked wealth,
Cool Juba heat with the air conditioners
Chilling out of the newly furnished
Bungalows and palaces.

We fight flies and fan off the airless heat in congested
Tin roofed shelters without ceiling boards
And ventilated window
- after Naivasha Days.

Dilemma

Emmanuel Monychol

Walking by the riverside,
Imagining dark eyes,
Tiny fish in Blue Ocean,
Crocodiles struggling to feed,
Hippos in the deep,

Waiting for the night to come.
Young Calypso suddenly appeared
In her flying dress,
Balancing a water jar – and singing.

I tried to stop her just to say, “Hello.”
The water jar dropped, water flooded the green grass
Forcefully uprooting and clearing weeds back to river.

Calypso’s voice rang: “Daddy! Daddy!
He has raped me.”

I saw gigantic hands
Hold me by the throat.
A man in uniform
Manacled my hands.

Three years later
The man with gigantic
hands died; he left a letter,
Urging me to promise him
A grandchild.

Legal Alien

Rutangye Crystal Butungi

I can't believe the receptionist is not going to take my consultation fee just because I'm from her tribe! I thought corruption was only for the politicians and big businessmen. But here, in a small town clinic, I am going to be the beneficiary of a corrupt doctor's receptionist. Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Well, I don't care right now. I have spent the day running around offices getting papers stamped. Now, I have to get a doctor to give me a check-up, approve this medical form, and stamp it. I was about to walk out of this clinic because the consultation fee alone, without the medical check-up fee, was way too high. But then, the receptionist glimpsed my name on the form and said, "Eh, you mean you are from my village! Why didn't you tell me your surname, I would have done you a favour." Then she started chatting away in *our* language.

"If you had told me where you were from, I wouldn't have told you to pay that high consultation fee. In fact, I've got enough for today, so don't bother paying for consultation. Just wait for the patient who is in now to come out and you can go in for your check-up." Thank goodness she sneaked those last sentences in English. She started rattling on in *our* language again. I dared not inform her that I didn't understand a single word she was saying. Today, was not going to be the day I revealed my excuse for not knowing my mother tongue.

I will not reveal to her that I became aware of my vernacular deprivation in '93, when I was a child. Daddy had taken me to the classroom and left me there. I stopped sobbing when the teacher led me in. The room was so big! There were over a hundred children in there; at least seven pupils on each of the fifteen or so benches. The walls were dirty, and you could see where the blue paint had been chipped at by enthusiastic kids. There were no cupboards, no teacher's desk, no carpet, no sleeping corner, no tiles. The room held only children, benches, a cemented floor and a huge, old blackboard positioned at the front. Everything was so dated. It was as if the décor had been inspired by an *Adams Family* episode. At the back of the classroom, bags were sprawled all over the floor, since there were not enough hooks on the wall to carry them all. I looked up at the man who I assumed was the class teacher, as I'd heard my daddy address him as Mr. Muhangazima, and asked, "Where is the fridge?"

There were loud gasps and the class started laughing. I began to cry again. Mr. Muhangazima bent down and quietly said, "This is a classroom. We don't keep fridges in classrooms. We don't have a fridge in the school, except the one in the canteen. *Mpozi* there's a new one in the kitchen –"

"But where will I keep my break time snacks?"

"Just leave them in your bag and then put it at the back of the classroom."

He led me to the back and pulled one bag off a strong hook, hastily threw it to the ground, and put mine in its place.

I couldn't understand my new surroundings. Back in Australia, my Grade 2 class – with just thirty-two pupils – was the biggest in the whole school. Each class had a fridge to keep snacks until break time and a microwave to warm them if necessary. My Australian class had a carpet for story time and tables for writing at and red and blue building blocks for doing algebra. We also had a painting corner, an 'imaginary' corner, and a sleeping corner for taking afternoon naps. And we could wear anything we wanted. Not like this school, where I had to wear white socks pulled up to my knees and a green and white checked dress that looked exactly like the ones mummy used to

wear when she was pregnant with my younger brother - except mine had a belt. Such a strange uniform!

Mr. Muhangazima took me to a bench at the back of the classroom. There were five pupils seated at it.

“Daisy is a good girl” he said as he beckoned me into a seat next to a thin lipped girl, “she will make friends with you.” He walked away chuckling as though it was hard for him to suppress his laughter. As soon as I sat and said “hello”, Daisy pulled away from me and in doing so almost pushed the others off the bench. She looked down at her book and continued doing the math exercises that Mr. Muhangazima had left on the board. I had never have to add fifteen to twelve without using building blocks, so I could not understand a thing. I didn’t want to be laughed at again, so I didn’t ask for them. Every time I tried to ask Daisy to explain, she inched further and further away from me. It was as if she was blocking me. There was some barrier I could not penetrate.

Barriers. My attention was brought back to the receptionist’s incessant rambling. Somewhere in between, I figured out she had offered me a seat in the waiting area right in front of her desk. It’s 2011 and I still feel like there are barriers I cannot penetrate, like this one. What on earth is she saying to me? It’s been 18 years and I still feel like that girl my classmates were inching away from. I can’t break into certain social circles because of this barrier. Either I’m trying to break into people’s lives, but they shrink from me because they don’t understand me or I’m avoiding people because I’m too ashamed to reveal that I don’t understand them. I wish I could hide from the receptionist right now. What if she figures out that I can’t speak *our* language? Will she still think of me as a village mate or will she feel taken advantage of and withdraw her no-consultation-fee offer? I’ve encountered so many barriers; age barriers, education barriers, gender barriers, but none has made me feel as alienated as the language barrier. Anyone can understand a woman fighting for her rights, but few comprehend how one can fail to learn their own language. Thank goodness more patients have walked in! Now the receptionist is preoccupied with explaining to them the high consultation fee prices. One patient has a Kenyan accent. Lucky her. Everyone can understand why she can’t speak any Ugandan languages. Perhaps next time I walk into a place I should speak with a foreign accent so that people can immediately address me in English. Urgh!! That thought reminds me again of that first day in school.

After that episode with Daisy, it was time for social sciences. The teacher was skinny and tall. She walked to the front of the class and crooned, “Good morning P.3 K.”

“Good morning, Miss Nakanwagi!” Everyone stood up to greet her.

“Good. Sit down. Where is the new girl?”

Everyone turned and looked me.

“Eh, they have not yet cut your hair? Did the headmaster give you permission to keep your hair long?”

I hadn’t noticed that none of the girls had hair on their heads. Before I had time to think about it, the teacher had sent a boy from the front of the class to the back and told me to take his place. At the front, I felt as if people’s stares were piercing my back. Halfway through the lesson, I began to feel stupid because I couldn’t answer any questions. She was asking about Muntu and Sera - the first humans on earth and then moved on to some tale, mentioning Gipiir and Labong. Then she asked the shape of the world. Finally! I shot my hand up - I definitely knew the answer this one!

“Yes new girl. Stand up and give us the answer.”

“It’s a circle.” I shouted, beaming.

The class burst out laughing.

“Repeat!” The teacher made me repeat my answer until my new classmates started mimicking my accent. I sat down, depressed. Everyone was laughing at me.

I was so relieved when it was time for break. I wished I could have hidden somewhere in the school and not return for another class! Before walking off to eat, I went to thank the teachers for their classes. They were sitting at their table on the classroom verandah. My thanking them sparked off some kind of debate.

“*Eh bambi*, the girl is from outside countries but she is still well-mannered,” said one of the teachers.

“You mean people from *bulaaya* have bad manners?” Mr. Muhangazima always seemed kind and supportive when he spoke.

“*Nanti* they are always proud and spoilt when they come back, but this one *bambi* even thanks us for teaching?”

“*Wamma* go and have your break before the bell rings.”

When I turned round to look for a place to sit, I wished I could have stayed with Mr. Muhangazima instead, because all the children were avoiding me. The school was so big. The road from the main gate led up to a roundabout. On the left side of the road was the lower primary section, made of primary one and two (referred to as P.1 and P.2). The rest of the school was on the right side of the road. This included the school kitchen, administrative offices, main hall and staff room. Each class had five streams; N, P, S, K and U, derived from N-akasero P-rimary S-chool K-ampala U-ganda. When daddy and I had reported to the headmaster’s office that morning, the headmaster asked which colour I liked best among yellow, blue, red, green and white. “Green”, I had said, because I was in green house in my school in Australia. So he allocated me to P.3K because all the K classes were in the green building of Eland house. Whoever designed the school was very organized, because each block of classes had five classrooms for the five streams. And the classes were huge; accommodating over a hundred pupils per stream. The P.3 and P.4 blocks were separated by a big, grassy, fenced compound. I sat on a step on the verandah of my P.3 block, near the teacher’s table. I began to eat the bread and cake mummy had packed for me. Then Daisy came up to me with another boy and asked, “*Wamma* did you used to talk to Eddie Murphy?”

“Who is Eddie Murphy?” I responded.

“The one who acted in *Coming to America*.”

“I don’t know Eddie Murphy. I came from Australia, not America”

“This boy said that your father is a black American! He saw your dad bringing you, he even heard him talking like from America.”

“No. My father is Ugandan, but we used to live in Australia.”

“You see I told you!” she said to the boy and they walked off arguing. Then break time was done.

The English teacher was awful. She started with my bench which was at the front. I couldn’t open my book with the homework she wanted, because since it was my first day at a Ugandan school; I didn’t have any homework completed. I didn’t want her to get to me because I hated the way she was screaming insults about everyone’s work. But I didn’t have enough time to nurture my fear because I was the fourth person in the row, “Where is your homework?” She asked.

“I’m -”

“Don’t tell me your nonsense!! Where is your homework?”

Before I could answer, her hand slap me hard across my face.

“Didn’t you hear me telling people to open their homework on the bench –”

The multiple shouts from the class telling her that I was a new pupil silenced her.

“Eh, sorry.” And she walked on, just like that, screaming at the next person in her broken English.

I had never been slapped before, except by my mummy. I had tried to be superman and flew off the top of a cupboard and sprained my knee and pretended to be dead. She was so scared and angry and happy at the same time, so that when I came to all she could do was slap me for giving her such a fright. But why would a teacher beat a student? In Australia, a teacher hit a child once in my nursery school and was arrested. No one is allowed to beat children there, except their parents or guardians, and even then, there were restrictions on how much a parent could beat their own child.

Beating. It is strange how I have gotten so used to it over the years. I am not even perturbed by the sound of policemen beating idlers on Bombo road just outside this building. The clinic is on the fourth floor where the tear gas doesn't seem to have had as much effect. The receptionist finished with the other patients and turned back to me. By her gestures I could tell she was saying something about the ongoing riots. Ever since Muammar Gaddafi died, the opposition thinks it can overthrow our president too. So every Monday they hold 'Walk to Work' demonstrations. All opposition party members and parliamentarians walk to their offices. Idlers and workers in town stand by the roadsides to cheer them on or join them, so every Monday morning the police and army roam about in 'mambas' spraying tear gas and pink water at the crowds, then the shops close for a few hours to prevent theft, until the protestors are arrested and released on bail, then the businessmen put on a demonstration because the 'Walk to Work' campaign disrupts their profit-making, then the university students hold a strike because the lecturers use the campaign to extend their weekends. This cycle has continued for months, such that medical workers, teachers and lawyers have also taken turns going on strike. I would like to use the routine to stay safe at home, but this week is my deadline for sending the papers.

This morning I took a taxi before the sun rose (and before the protestors started walking to work). I wisely spent the morning going to offices further from the town center where there wasn't much commotion. In the afternoon, I had to brave the remaining disturbances to visit the offices in town. I hid in the crowded toilets of the commercial buildings and turned on a tap to wash tear gas out of my eyes. Everyone was in their offices because they couldn't go out into the smoky streets, so I got everything else signed and stamped, except my medical forms. There was no way I was going to get through to the taxi park to go to my family's clinic. Well, at least not until the evening when everyone would stop rioting and go home. So I stopped at the first signposted town clinic and entered into the safest-looking building. And here I am now, staring at the receptionist's blabbering mouth. Our pseudo-conversation was interrupted by a small crowd rushing a bleeding child into the reception. I couldn't tell if the blood was coming from the child's forehead or eye. Either way, the blood managed to mingle with mucus from the nose and so was smeared all over the left side of the child's face. The mother was wailing. She looked more terrified than the injured little girl who was sobbing quietly. The girl must have been about eight years old. As they whisked her into the emergency room, I thought the receptionist would finally be silenced by the horrific scene. I was wrong. It gave her a lot more to blabber about. I think she started talking about things that make women and girls cry. I hate seeing crying girls. They remind me of that unforgettable first day.

I sobbed and cried quietly throughout the English lesson that day. The teacher made me think of the stories of Amin that I had heard. Daddy said the reason we came back to Uganda was because President Amin was no longer president. H. E. Museveni had restored peace, and so we didn't have to be in exile anymore. If it wasn't for Amin, maybe I wouldn't be feeling like an outcast in my country and new school. My big sisters wanted to stay in Sidney for a few more years, but daddy said when death came his way; it should find him in his own country. He had spent the last two years sending money back to Uganda in order to build a home for us. Also, since he was a vice-principal of a teacher's training college in Australia, Makerere University offered him a big job that

he couldn't turn down. I thought I would find peace in Uganda like he said, but instead, the English teacher had just slapped me. I tried hard not to pee in my pants in terror of it all. I resolved never to come back to school again. But then, as soon as the teacher ended her class, the children sitting around me started saying sorry and offering me sweets and telling me how I'd get used to the beatings and all. Suddenly, I was making friends. The children were no longer scared of talking to me. This began my orientation into my country, Uganda.

Uganda was horrible at first! When we arrived, three weeks before my initiation into Ugandan school days, we did not have electricity for two days in a row. After that, electricity was off every other night. There were only two TV stations; UTV and CTV. Between those two stations, there were only five cartoons; *Pingu*, *Superbook*, *Kissyfur*, *Duck Tales* and *Didi*. Well *Didi* wasn't a cartoon, but he was just as fun to watch since he was a clown. In Australia, power only went off once or twice a year, and the dates of the power cuts were announced at least six months before the blackout. And there were two whole channels dedicated to cartoons all day and night. Here, the cartoons only came on during the weekdays in the evenings, so I spent my weekends learning how to play *kwepena* (dodgeball) and *dool* (shooting marbles) with my neighbours. I have learnt a lot since then, over the years. I have learnt to kneel when greeting elders and to peel and steam *matooke* in its banana leaves. I have learnt to iron clothes with a charcoal iron when there is no power, and to cook with firewood. I learnt to wear three pairs of shorts under my school uniform so that it didn't hurt as much when I was caned by teachers. I learnt enough Luganda to bargain for things in Owino market, and how to make *kwepena* balls out of any piece of soft rubbish in the compound. I no longer have an Australian accent. My friends learnt a lot too. They learnt the difference between Australia and America. They learnt that not every Ugandan abroad is cleaning toilets and bedpans in hospitals. They learnt that not every child from abroad is a spoilt brat who can't climb trees; in fact, children from *bulaaya* can be very generous with their fancy toys! They learnt that it is futile to speak vernacular to someone who spent the first nine years of their life speaking English in a foreign continent. In fact, had it not been for the numerous relatives that camped at our spacious home for years after we got back, I probably wouldn't even be able to speak the little Luganda I do now. And we speak Luganda, not because it is our language, but because daddy's new job is in the country's capital - Bugandaland. Everyone from every other tribe in the country learns to speak Luganda when they live here. Most of them know their own languages too. But a few, like me, who only visit our villages once or twice a year, will forever suffer this minor identity crisis and those quizzical looks we get every time someone declares, "You can't speak your language!"

But today, I am not going get that look. I am going to let the receptionist blabber on in *our* mother tongue, and I'll keep nodding and laughing and exclaiming at appropriate intervals, because that is my ticket to getting into the doctor's room without paying that expensive consultation fee. Then he'll fill in my medical form, stamp it, and I'll get out and say bye to the receptionist in Luganda or English. Then she'll say bye to me in Luganda or English and she won't find it weird because everyone in Kampala speaks Luganda or English. Then I'll get out and add my medical form to my other papers which I will submit to the embassy. Then they will call me after a few days to let me know if I've been approved for a visa to fly out of my country to do my masters degree in Australia.

Waiting

Hellen Nyana

The chick in the purple top, high waist skirt and kitten heels definitely knows how to dress in an understated yet alluring sort of way. Not a hair out of place - I had to stop and stare to make sure there really wasn't a hair out of place - subtle make-up and clean, short, fingernails. The fastened buttons of her button-down shirt stop slightly above her bosom, giving me an ever so slight peep as she heaves in subtle anticipation. She is a snob though. Earlier on, when I tried to greet her and introduce myself, she had politely answered, but had deliberately refused to give me her name, walking off instead and sitting at the other end of the table where she pretends to read a book. No one can convince me they can concentrate on a book while they wait for a life-altering experience so she has to be pretending. Then there is the breast-feeding chick. Not that she has come with a child to the job interview, but the tight knot around her chest attracts even more attention to the already lifted boobs, thanks to an obviously effective push-up bra. She keeps checking herself in her pocket mirror and adding layers and layers of grease to her lips. She might be bored, like all of us are in the waiting room but she definitely intends to rely heavily on her "bosom buddies" to nail the job. Those boobs better do a good job today or I would hate to think what she will do to them if they fail her, I think to myself. I turn to my HTC and update my twitter status to: *Had I known boobs played a big role in getting a job, I would have been born a woman. #WinningNot*

The waiting room is down a long corridor, next to a conference hall with a big wooden door in which the written and oral interviews are to take place. The room is portioned off with a glass screen and a sliding door. The glass has patterns on it, such that the people on the inside and those on the outside can see figures on either side without making out the faces. It is furnished quite tastefully with black sofas and a glass-top table in the room's centre, topped with business magazines and profile pamphlets on the organisation conducting the interviews - the Ministry. Six of us have just been herded into the room from the reception. We mumble greetings to the people who are next to us in the line and attempt to look for comfortable spots in the room which can easily fit twenty people. I take the seat nearest to the entrance just in case I need to dash out, and also it can't hurt to see all the people that want the job.

The profile pamphlets are the first to be picked up and like hot, meaty bites at a cocktail party, they go fast. One must know everything they can about the company they want to work for, I guess. I pick one from the last two and begin to leaf through.

My reading is interrupted when a short, old man in an oversized coat sweeps into the room. He says in a firm and loud voice, "Good morning everybody. How are you all today?" We all mumble unintelligible things, some of us startled out of our private worlds by his commanding presence. Due to his air of authority, if I had not seen him before at the written interview we had in Namboole, I would have thought he already worked for the Ministry and had come to instruct us in the next step of the selection process. He goes ahead and pumps some hands, sprinkling more pleasantries as he jumps over people to reach those seated on the other side of the table. They have already warmed up their seats and refuse to leave their strategic vantage points. He finds a seat on the other side of the table which is directly opposite the entrance and proceeds to pull out a bunch of papers and starts going over them with furious concentration, as if preparing for a final exam. From the unnaturally black edges on his scalp, you can tell he has recently dyed his hair. Dude, you

should have cut off that beard completely because those grey hairs are not helping in your mission to look young, I mentally chastise the short, old man in an oversized coat.

When he looks up from his papers, he seems to recognise the chick that has come in after him and has chosen to sit next to me. Through their conversation later, I find out her name is Lydia. She takes a seat and goes through the newspaper she carried in with her. She mumbles comments about the day's headlines and makes fun of a photograph showing a smiling bank executive handing toys to a malnourished child. The emaciated body had made the front page the previous week.

"Corporate Social Responsibility, my foot!" she grumbles.

She looks up, her gaze meeting the short, old man in an oversized coat who has now moved from his seat.

"You made it to this round I see," he says while enthusiastically shaking her hand and looking around as if to make sure the rest of us have heard.

"So did you," she says smiling, "How have you been, Mzee? We should stop meeting like this," she adds removing her bag from the next seat and offering it to him instead.

He sits down next to her and the two start to catch up. From their conversation, I can tell they have met several times in different companies, always being interviewed for one job or another.

"No. We didn't stand a chance at that Parliament job. Did you see the pile of letters where our application letters were thrown?" He asks rhetorically. "I bet if we tried to find out who the current editor of the *Hansard* is, it is definitely someone who already knew someone there," he adds with a defeated shrug.

The old man goes into a tirade about how he would have given up the whole job search had it not been for the children he has to put through school. What is turning into a pity party is broken up when one of the interviewers enters and announces that the next interview is due soon and we need to move to the conference room next door. Two other people stand at the door panting and checking their watches. Written all over their faces is the relief that they've managed to make it to the next round. We shuffle to the next room, take our seats and get ready for our second written interview.

"There has been a natural disaster in one of the rural constituents which has claimed ten lives and left hundreds of families displaced. Write a speech for the Minister of Disaster Preparedness which he will deliver when he goes to sympathise with the survivors".

That is our first question.

This question, instead of arousing panic or excitement, reminds me of my father. He always says I'm good with words and it is because of him I am here. The first time he told me to get in touch with his friend at the Ministry for a communications officer's job, I said no straight out. I had just come back from one of the best technology universities in Malaysia where I did a Bachelor of Arts in games art development and I wasn't going to waste my time being whatever my father suggested. People always frowned at the kind of course I did, many questioning its marketability in a third world country, but how are we going to become less third world, if we don't introduce some of the things we see and learned in the first world? And why can't third world students study subjects they are passionate about, instead of what their country's limited job markets force them to do?

I clearly remember the day my passion for video games started. I was six years old and my father had just returned from a trip abroad and he presented me with a *Super Mario Bros* game. He had planned to get me a toy car, but when he saw his American friend pick up the grey, rectangular cartridge for his son at the store, he decided to get the game for me instead. He did not know how

to operate it so I had to teach myself, my mother swears they did not see me for a week. I could never refute that accusation considering that video game became my best friend and incited my passionate love affair with video games. Every time my father went on a trip I asked that he bring me not the trendiest clothes, but the latest video games. *The Legend of Zelda*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Dragon Warrior* saw me through my tumultuous teenage years, when I escaped into them, trying to get over my crush on Crystal - our next door neighbour or when I wanted to impress Bella - the first girl who came over our house to visit when I was 17. Later I graduated to *Assassin's Creed*, *Black OPs*, *Battlefield 3 Online* and *Modern Warfare 3* and my love for gaming was pretty much sealed.

Over the years, I met people with similar interests and while in Malaysia, I decided to do a course so I could set up the first gaming arcade in the country when I returned. Every day I dreamt of having that arcade and doing something I loved. My father, like with most of the suggestions I presented to him, laughed off the idea. He said it would never work, although he still continued to pay my school fees and made sure I was more than comfortable as a foreign student. He must have hoped I would get over the idea by the time I graduated. He never ceased to mention how good I was at communicating and how he was always impressed by poems I had written. I always enjoyed watching him fidget when his friends asked what I did in school. He became adept at steering the conversation towards himself, he would say "some sort of engineering but he writes well too" so as to prevent me from revealing my desired vocation.

He told me about the communications officer vacancy, even before it was advertised in the papers. This was no surprise. He must have told his friends I was coming home and he needed work for his son. When I said no, he gave me a long lecture about how he had indulged my childish choices for long enough, "It's about time you became realistic and looked for a job that is actually available on the market" he told me. I argued that the reason they'd sent us out to acquire knowledge was so we could learn new ideas and introduce them into our own country and make it a better place.

I tried desperately to convince him, "There is no doubt that I would make it work. I have done all the research about what I need and if you invest in me I will have paid you back with interest in the first six months."

This did not go down well with my father though, "Listen young man" he told me "you have already wasted enough of my money and I will definitely not spend another dime on your wishful thinking on games and what not." A vein popped up in the middle of his forehead, like it always did when he was determined to win an argument.

Unfortunately, while abroad and generously provided for, it had never crossed my mind to save some of the money my father had been sending me. I had never faced any resistance from him concerning most of the things I told him about, so I always believed he would be interested in investing in the arcade.

Days later, I received a call, a woman was on the other end and she informed me of an upcoming written interview for a job at Namboole which I was expected to attend – even though I had not applied for it.

So this was how on a hot Wednesday morning I had ended up in Namboole stadium competing with about hundred people for one job. We were all smartly dressed in our most impressive clothes, for some they were probably wearing their suits for the first time or in their first pair of heels. We were tested on our knowledge of press releases and public relation strategies and I must have done well because here I am again, sitting for another written interview with ten other people.

After the interview, they ask us to wait around but I decide to take a walk around the offices instead. I cannot stand that waiting room anymore. The air conditioning alone makes the room too cold and none of us can tell who actually wants it on or whether it can be switched off. After wandering around for a bit, I go to use the gents to wash my face. I am always fascinated with the notices put up in washrooms. I believe you can tell a lot about an establishment from them. On the walls, this particular one has: IF YOU SPRINKLE WHEN YOU TINKLE, PLEASE BE A SWEETIE AND WIPE THE SEATIE. If worst came to the worst and I ended up here, (which I doubt I will considering the little effort I put in the interview that I've just finished), at least the people here seem to have a good sense of humour - or the person who wrote it had been a kindergarten teacher at some point, in which case I could not be bothered. Once I had mistakenly ended up in the ladies' washroom. If I'm completely honest, it wasn't a mistake really; the gents had no toilet paper so after looking around and making sure was there no one in the ladies', I went there to get some. An unsuspecting woman caught me reading a notice that said: BE CONSIDERATE OF THE PEOPLE WHO USE THIS PLACE AFTER YOU. IMAGINE HOW YOU WOULD LIKE TO FIND THIS PLACE AND DO THE SAME. ALSO, DO NOT FLUSH SANITARY TOWELS. RAP THEM NICELY AND PLACE THEM IN THE BUCKET. The women in that establishment obviously needed a long lecture on hygiene and correct spellings.

Back in the waiting room, I'm told that four of us have been asked to stay for an oral interview. The chick in the purple top, Lydia, myself and some other dude who came in right before we went in for the written interview. The rest have been asked to kindly collect a soda or water from the reception and were thanked for their time. The short, old man in an oversized coat is sticking around talking to Lydia and like a father at his daughter's sports' day, taking her through some of the questions she may be asked.

The latecomer goes in first and comes out looking more stressed than he did an hour ago. We lean in conspiratorially to hear his verdict of the panel.

"They are pretty friendly except for the man in the middle who kept asking me more questions before I could give my answers. Such a bully!" he says exasperated.

Lydia is called in and we wish her the very best. After hearing the other guy's verdict we're friendlier to each other, having seen how the other people with whom we begun the day have been dismissed without a care. We saw their worried faces and their tired, defeated shrugs. We have survived and somehow this had brought us closer and made us more comfortable with each other. Finally someone complains about the air conditioning and I move to put it at a more bearable temperature.

"How are you even supposed to gauge the amount of money you want them to pay you without underselling yourself? We should have agreed on the salary we all want," the other guy says obviously regretting whatever amount he said while in there. We all deliberately ignore the salary question. Yes we are friends now, but we are not going to blurt out what we think we're worth.

Lydia walks out and we listen for our names in anticipation.

"Can we have Florence next," says the lady responsible for the summoning. The chick in the purple top stands and marches to the conference room.

Lydia says she does not want to talk about it. Minutes later she seems to change her mind and says rather angrily, "It's horrible in there. You would think after doing it so many times I would be used to it!"

When Florence comes back to the waiting room, she sits down cautiously, like someone with a sore body. With a blank stare she says in an unsteady voice, "One of my current bosses is on the panel."

We gasp and can offer no words of comfort.

“I do not remember anything I said after I saw him. I called in sick this morning so I could get the day off. I guess they needed someone with a journalistic background to judge our work,” she says fighting back tears.

For the first time I think of the short, old man’s children, the breast-feeding chick’s effort to get ahead and Florence who is now apprehensively biting her nails. I do not know whether this is what they have always wanted to do, but they are fighting for it. I had been on panels like these before. When presenting my first game concept at university and presenting even more ideas in competitions held in different universities internationally. The key was to believe in what you were selling and to never falter in what you believed. That was my belief anyway. And I must have subconsciously given off that vibe to the panel, because to my father’s delight and my deepest despair, I receive a phone call a week later confirming that I am the new communications officer at his friend’s office.

I Died Alive

Harriet Anena

I died
But my heart still breathed
I was speechless
But a voice resounded within
I was sightless
But my inner eye watched the outside
I was immobile
But agile dreams took me miles away
I died
But I died alive

It's a Night Job

Joanita Male

You have to understand, I did not choose this life - it chose me. My childhood had somehow prepared me for this job – if you can call it a job that is. My mother had the same job and her mother as well. I guess I couldn't escape it.

It's a cold evening, and it's around 7 pm. I'm sure it will not rain today. The rain cuts business down almost to zero. You see, the street side is not a place to be during a downpour. The sky is a dark blue with a few stars spread out, that's how I know it will not rain. I've been told stars are a sure sign that the skies will hold back. *Thank God!*

I'm wearing the white dress, the stretchy one that shows the curve of my hips clearly. White is a good colour when you're trying to be noticed among several other girls, especially when your complexion is as dark as mine. My make-up has been applied. My mum taught me how to wear make-up. Maroon lipstick (red was for the light skinned ones) and a bit of eye shadow. I'm wearing six inch heels, not so much for fashion but more to be noticed easier. At 5' 1", I am one of the shorter girls here. I'm not wearing any underwear; I have learnt that sometimes the only way to get customers is to give a preview of what's to come.

I'm standing on Burton Street, the small stretch before the roundabout to Yusuf Lule road. Most of the girls are already there. This street has no lights at all. I like that about it, any sign of lights means we have a potential client. The buildings on this street are homes that were turned into offices. They have domineering gates with large signposts at the entrance. There isn't a sound from them at this time.

Lights. I quickly bend over, enough to give the driver a glimpse of what he will be getting if they choose me. I manage to bend yet still twist my body so they can see a bit of my face. I'm smiling. I'm good at that now. It comes with practice; I don't have to be happy to smile. I can conjure up a smile at your slightest bidding...it's one of the requirements of the job.

A white corona slows down next to me, I can tell by the car that this client might not pay as handsomely as I would like, but I learnt a long time ago not to pass up any offers, you might go hungry if you do.

A dark face is staring at me all I see are wide eyes and sparkling teeth.

"Get in," he shouts with impatience. He has to drive off before anyone sees him. I jump in, still smiling, I'm not sure where we are going, but I have to be clear on my prices.

"Long or short?" I ask loudly, with my eyebrows raised, it's something I always do.

"Long, how much?" he shouts out.

This might be a difficult one, I think to myself. "Fifty thousand," I say.

"Okay," he blurts out as we drive off to what I assume is Ntinda. Getting home won't be too expensive, I stay in Naalya and that's pretty close to where we're going. We pull up at Max's motel. Everyone that stays in Ntinda uses this spot. We come out of the car and he rushes out. I follow after him like an unwanted puppy. They always act this way at first, like they're doing you a favour. I hate this part!

We get to the room and he wastes no time taking off his clothes. He lays there on the double bed covered with a thick brown blanket. Everything about this motel is dull. Ugly brown curtains to match the blankets, cream walls and basic furniture, everything looks as if they were dragged out of the nearby primary school.

Everything about this motel is dull apart from the people. The different clients that is. They range from the *boda-boda* rider who decides to pleasure himself with the day's earnings to the city tycoon who tries to remain inconspicuous on his visits.

I look down at him and he is well built, much better than most of my usual clients. He looks at me waiting. I hate this part too. The beginning. I pull up my dress. Even though he's paying for 'long' I am determined to give him 'short'. I'm not in the mood to do too much today. I'll please him enough to the point where he can't tell the difference. We are at it now; this is the part that I don't hate so much, the satisfaction I give them. All of them. We rock away as the motel bed creaks. I can partly hear the beds in the neighbouring rooms making the same sound; it's like a song matching rhythms, matching beats. His face is twisted almost as if he is in pain. I know that means I am doing a good job.

He's a first timer. I'm sure of it. He asked the price. No one ever asks the price.

It's over now. I'm thinking about it and I am pretty sure this is the part I actually hate the most. The self-loathing. The moment I start to blame all of this on my mother, the point where I am flooded with memories of listening to my mother cry every night when they left. The different men she brought home, that is. I always wondered what made her so unhappy. She had enough money to look after us on her own and she was a good mother. It's only now that I am older that I understand.

"Pay up," I shout.

I am not smiling any more. When it's time to get paid it helps not to smile.

"But, you're expensive," *Of course now that it's over, he realizes.* I don't say anything, arguing never works, I just look at him, stare actually. He pulls out a crumpled fifty thousand shilling note. The old notes, the ones that are larger and much paler. I grab it and stick it in my bra before he changes his mind. He goes to the tiny bathroom to wash off.

He really is a first timer.

I waste no time rummaging through his trousers. Nothing. I check his shirt, there's a wallet, a few crumpled ten thousands, I grab them and then I'm gone.

Max's motel is conveniently or should I say inconveniently situated away from the main road. This means I have to call my *boda-boda* guy. *Great!*

I'm home now. I throw on pair of leggings before I got home; I wonder what girls did before leggings were in vogue. Mother opens the door. She is smiling at me; she knows I have some money for her. She stopped bringing the men home a long time ago; there isn't a large market for hookers over fifty. How did I get myself into this? I can't even explain to myself. Maybe it was because of the several daddies I had or watching my mother apply make-up every day and somehow look after us. Or maybe it's the fact that I was raised on the words "Look after your body, you never know when you'll need it to make a living." Maybe that's it.

It's the receptionist job I have, that's where I get the money. This is what I tell her, this is what she pretends to believe. Maybe she does believe it, I don't really know. Mother sticks out her small hand, waiting. Even at fifty she's still in great shape even though she isn't as beautiful as she used to be. The job took its toll on her. There's a shadow of regret behind every smile she wears, maybe this is the effect of the night job. That's why I'm going to stop, seriously. Soon, someday. I greet her and hand over the fifty thousand note, she's still smiling as she goes on about how much I make her proud. Okay, I'm certain now, this really is actually the part I hate the most, my mother's adoration.

I walk to my room, I have a long day tomorrow, my university class has a sociology test to sit.

At 84

Sophie N. Bamwoyeraki

Your teeth have fled their nest.
Dust rules over the Holy Book.
Untouched buttons of your radio look on.
Curtain folds are like a nurse's starched uniform.
Your soup bowl has become a roach's pool.
Your appetite is painted in dull colours.
Your walking stick is the centre in the spider's handcraft.
Vivacity basks in a second childhood.
The sturdy voice that bounced on walls is now drained.
The kite-sharp eyesight simmers on dying fire.
Your countenance is the light of a fast sinking sun.
Muscles of steel now soft like newly ground corn.
Humour has abandoned your garden.
Where are the mighty hands that lifted me when I fell?
Silent weeds strangle years.
Tendrils of life are tangled up and bewildered.
Your worm-eaten garb sways in the wind.
My eyes well up and rage weighs my throat down.
You are the mahogany never meant to shed his leaves.

The Sign

Sneha Susan Shibu

It was Thursday, a day not much different from any other day of the week. Winter was harsher than the previous years and the pale morning sun shone from an ashen sky. Majid watched his daughter cough and curl up on the floor which had been newly laid with a not-so-old carpet that he had picked from the dump the previous day. It spread some warmth to their one roomed desert home in the settlement of Panar. Pneumonia was rampant and he had taken his daughter to different hospitals before a doctor finally agreed to attend to her. He was advised to keep the little girl warm and give her some medicines before it got worse.

“Come, have an egg with some *khubz* and tea,” called Faridah.

Majid heard his sons playing happily outside. He watched in silence as his wife fretted around. The dark circles around her eyes, her stubby fingers and callous-hardened palms made her look very different from the girl he had married. She moved a small table into the middle of the room, which served as living room, dining area, kitchen and bedroom. The toilet and shower outside were shared by many families. Their furniture was limited to seven plastic chairs and the small table. A 21” television, crowned by cheap plastic flowers, rested atop a wooden crate in a corner. Coca-cola bottles were recycled to hold drinking water. They did not eat chicken every day. Even if they did, there would be no leftovers, so the presence of a refrigerator was unnecessary.

Majid knew Faridah had not slept for days on account of their daughter’s illness. Her face had become gaunt in less than a week, but she never whined about anything and although he was glad for that, he also felt secretly guilty. Every day he hoped for something to happen that would improve their lot.

“Jamila, Baba is going. Wish him well.”

Faridah picked the little girl from the floor. She resisted and broke out into a loud wail. The flustered mother made soothing clucking noises to pacify the disturbed child.

“I’ll try to come early today,” said Majid as he finished his tea.

“*Insha- Allah.*”

Majid walked to the highway where he waited for the grey bus to take him to the city. Pale brown desert, dotted by thorny bushes, stretched monotonously on either side of the road. His *dishdasha* fluttered in the wind while the *shumag* protected him from the cold and dust. He camouflaged his winter-cracked feet in a pair of old woollen socks and fake leather shoes he had picked from one of the small discount shops. It was not easy for any of the *bidān jinsiyya* to make both ends meet. Every day he hoped and prayed that the city’s authorities would not arrest him for working. Since begging was prohibited, they resorted to odd jobs, most of them illegitimate. Being a bedoun, neither Majid nor his father or his grandfather ever attended school. A lot of disadvantages came with being illiterate in a modern society. He was sustained by the mercy of Aziz in whose shop he kept his tools.

“How is little Jamila?” asked Aziz.

“Getting better. Thank you for asking,” said Majid.

“I was worried as you did not turn up for two days.”

Aziz was a good citizen with a golden heart. He ran a modest shop that sold electrical goods. He allowed Majid to put up a notice that announced the service he offered, but he did not seek anything in return. All that he felt in his heart was a burning zeal to help a fellow being to make an

honest living. On a good day, Majid would have made five to seven dinars, but good days did not come often. He lived on *khubz* and *laban* for lunch. Quite often Aziz shared with Majid a portion of his lunch which he brought from home - some chicken, *felaful* or *baba ganouj*. Sometimes Aziz ordered from Mehboob's grill. Guilt plagued Majid, whenever Aziz offered him a kebab, as he felt he was being an unnecessary burden.

"Eat, Majid. If you don't I will feel bad," Aziz would coax.

"*Shukran*." In order not to offend the generosity of his host, Majid would accept.

He knew he would never be able to repay the goodness shown to him. He prayed for a miracle in his life with which he could help other people just as Aziz had helped him. Every day, during the five times he bowed towards *Makkah*, he prayed fervently for that miracle amongst many others.

At forty-five, Majid had to feed a family of five. He was in a way thankful that his parents had died before Operation Levinbolt which brought about a lot of hardships. At that time Majid was a young man of twenty-three, full of fire and fervor to save the motherland which never recognized him. He enlisted himself in the low ranks of the army and witnessed with his own eyes the ravages of war.

"There is no glory in war. Just death and bloodshed. There is no exhilaration in the veins as the tanks roll on the streets, but just a hollow feeling. Is it for the empty feeling inside or is it for the gory sights that you claim victory? It's just a sham!" Many a time, Majid poetically recounted his experience over a cup of herbed tea.

In the war, Aziz lost his family and all his possessions. For many months he lived in the communal tent, depressed, keeping to himself and wishing for death, which never visited him. He saw others die and that slowly opened his eyes.

"What's gone is gone. Let me make myself useful now," he told himself.

He helped bury people and assisted whenever an extra pair of hands was needed. During that time he rubbed shoulders with some bedouins who evoked in him a feeling of awe due to their fortitude and dedication to a people who did not care for them. Perspectives change with experience and his experience with the bedouins filled Aziz with a respect for them which was second only to God. The tanks retreated beyond the burning borders and the bedouins went back to their marginalized, underprivileged, unrecognized life. Aziz could not do anything to prevent it. Shame gnawed at his core as the red, black and green flag flew high in the glory of newly bought freedom. The Allied forces were cheered while the selfless sacrifice of the bedouins sank into oblivion.

"I burned under the shame of hypocrisy. I felt useless," said Aziz.

"What can *one* man do?" asked Majid as Aziz became somber.

"I don't know. I just don't know." Aziz sipped his tea slowly.

"The goodness you are showing to me is itself a great deal. God has prepared a great reward for you in heaven."

"Heaven?" snorted Aziz.

"Yes, one may not be able to make big *changes*. But know one thing - you have made a big *difference* in my life by showing me kindness. I believe you are one of God's angels. His *Malak*."

"Oh, Majid, doesn't flattery have a limit?"

"It is not flattery."

Aziz put his cup away and went back behind the counter.

"*As salamu alaikum*."

Two young Egyptians came in blue overalls and asked for wiring cables.

"*Wal aikum salam*."

As Aziz disappeared behind the racks, one of the Egyptians looked around and went to Majid and gave him his right shoe that gaped like a toothless mouth.

"Will take some time," said Majid. "It needs stitching."

"I'll wait." The young man sat down on the blue plastic stool while his companion waited out with the cables as Majid got busy with the job. The dusty old leather shoe whined and hissed as the needle and thread passed through it. In less than seven minutes the trap was closed. The young man tried it on, smiled in satisfaction and looked at Majid.

"How much?"

"Fifty fils only."

"Only! Fucking bedoun is damn expensive!" Cursed the youth, while rummaging his pocket.

Majid looked hard at him without flinching. He knew he was the cheapest cobbler around.

"Here, take, dog!" The young man grinned sardonically, revealing nicotine stained teeth as he tossed the coin.

Majid pretended to be deaf. He clenched his jaws and his heart burned to retaliate but he knew it would do him no good.

"*Shukran.*"

The Egyptian muttered something inaudible on his way out and joined his companion for a smoke.

"*Masris!* I'm sorry about that, Majid," said Aziz.

Majid smiled weakly as he secured his *shumag*. "I have learned in life that when one is powerless, there is nothing greater than patience and forgiveness. They call me 'dog' but I did not see any one of them when this country was burning!" He blinked away the tears of pain.

Aziz shook his head and took up the newspaper. He skimmed through the headlines. Something caught his eye:

CABINET MOVES TO GRANT CITIZENSHIP

"Majid, there is some good news! The cabinet is trying to get approval to grant citizenship to bedouns. You will no longer be *bidan jinsiyya!*"

"How many times has this circus now happened, Aziz? We are tired of this so called 'movement in parliament.' This week I took Jamila to many hospitals. They refused to treat her, reason being that she is a bedoun."

"Oh."

"Is that a crime? Does it make her less human?"

"I'm sorry about it, but you know, it is not easy. Your situation is so tricky. While some of you were here longer than us citizens, but out in the desert as bedouins, others wormed in after burning their papers, in the hope of getting benefits bestowed on citizens. Now, how to sift the legitimate from the illegitimate? Even King Solomon would have found it a tough job."

"True. What you say is true. But this wait, this injustice..."

"Look, Majid, in a war, it is not only the bad people who are killed. Good people suffer too. I'm not justifying it, but that's how it works."

"I remember my father telling me about how he had participated in the six day war of 1967. To raise an army they used us bedouns. But after the war, the bedouns went back to the desert. My father never received any benefits. He felt used. Some others had rewards, but they were very minimal when compared to what the citizen army personnel got. We are discriminated against atrociously; we are seen as being low, even lower than that of animals. That has affected our dignity." Majid sighed, "Yesterday Badru was arrested for selling watermelons."

Aziz looked up from the newspaper and adjusted his glasses. There was nothing he could say. Luckily for him, *adhan* for *Dhuhr* filled the air. The two men spread their prayer mats and knelt down observing *Qibla* towards *Makkah*. The muezzins' melodious chants reverberated in the stillness of that winter noon. The streets were less noisy for the next fifteen minutes as life came to a temporary standstill only to resume the flurry once the prayer was over. The two men - one

citizen and the other bedoun - lost in worship bowed their heads before one God. He who dwells in the heavens and in the hearts of men would not have seen any difference between them.

While folding his mat after prayers, Majid looked deeply pensive.

“Why so thoughtful?” asked Aziz.

“I was just thinking whether we bedouns should be worshipping a bedoun God!”

“Shush! What a thing to say!” chided Aziz.

“I sometimes wonder if He is deaf and blind. Has He not taken long? He seems to be hiding His face in shame. Our souls have grown weary. That’s why I..”

“Don’t let despair make you utter blasphemy! Which God should I be praying to then? The God who watched over my home and family, watched them perish. But that does not mean I have to look for another God. Our life situations teach us many great truths,” said Aziz patting Majid reassuringly on the shoulder.

“Is there justice?”

“I’m sure there is, but we need to open our mind’s eye to see and feel it. Sometimes we may never understand it. My life in the camp has taught me that there is nothing greater than being of service.”

Aziz looked at his crestfallen friend. He could see nothing but misery and a state of desperation brought on by the wait that has taken long to be answered. He knew Majid prayed for freedom in its most simple yet intricate sense. He could not even vaguely imagine the disabilities of a life with no privileges; of not having an identity. Like a body with no face. He saw pain and anguish hovering in those dark eyes. Sadly, there was nothing he, Aziz, could do. All he had learned was to show kindness, which of course was a great thing but quite useless in the context.

“The day will come soon,” assured Aziz.

“I’m just reminded of the day my father died. At that time I did not know that he was a corpse with no identity; that he only had rights to be buried incognito just like his father. The same might happen for me. Not that it matters much, but it is a good thing for the future generations to see the resting place of their forefathers; for that sense of belonging. As for us, we belong to nowhere. From nowhere, going nowhere, with nothing to prove our existence,” said Majid.

“Please don’t speak like that. Have some hope.”

“It is the same *hope* that has disillusioned me.”

“Let’s have some lunch,” urged Aziz in an attempt to deviate from the prickly topic. He adjusted his *ogal* and brought out his lunch pack. Majid went out to get his *khubz* and *laban*. On special days and during Ramadan, he survived on the food from the mosque. If possible he managed to fill a plastic bag to feed his family and some friends. Usually, he lived on the *zakat* of Ali Baba bakers, who gave away *khubz* and *laban* as lunch for hundred people. Labour class Egyptians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Indians, all queued up to partake in Ali Baba’s generosity. Each would get a pack of four warm *khubz* and a small bottle of *laban*. It might not be a balanced diet, but that food kept many alive for years. Majid hurried back to Aziz’s shop where the latter awaited his return.

Every morning Aziz woke up early and prepared his breakfast and lunch. And he took care to make an extra portion when it came to chicken or lamb. He was only happy to share food with Majid. The aroma of spiced lamb curry filled the shop as Aziz opened his lunch box. He spooned out a generous portion for Majid who thought of his family at Panar.

Faridah utilized her skill in stitching. The money she made from it helped her buy meat for the family and medicines when the children fell ill. A rich Arab woman liked the embroidery she did and wanted more of it. It hurt her fingers and put a strain on her eyes, but she made new pieces for the precious small earnings. Since they did not attend school, the children were at home or in the vicinity, frolicking or bickering with other children. The housework, the embroidery and the three

children were quite a handful, but she managed it all with much fortitude. Sometimes the rich woman gave her milk powder and flour and even old clothes for Jamila, Siraj and Omar, which she thankfully accepted. It was a relief given their circumstances.

“Nice lamb. Have some of my *khubz*. It tastes great with lamb,” offered Majid.

“Then who will eat this rice? Next time I’ll come prepared,” smiled Aziz.

Majid looked at Aziz and said, “Indeed, God lives.”

That night, after *'Isha* prayers, as he recounted the day’s events, Majid told his wife of his hope that God will answer his prayers soon. He looked up at the dark expanse of the winter sky. The wind whistled and died among the sand dunes. Camels loitered outside the settlement. He sat near the window, prayed in his heart and watched the sky. The clouds drifted southwards and a distant star twinkled. His joyous heart leapt like a hornbill’s at the first drop of rain. The last time he had seen a star scintillate that brightly was the night before Aziz gave him space in his shop. He remembered that bygone time when he had almost decided to kill his family and himself in the face of impending uncertainty. He knocked on many doors with his unimpressive bag of tools but was turned down, unsurprisingly. One day he was tired after his hunt for shelter and sat in front of a shop which happened to be Aziz’s. It was nearing noon and the sun was hot. Aziz asked him in, gave him some water and they talked. That was the beginning of a new phase in Majid’s life.

“Baba, why are you smiling?” asked Omar looking up at the night sky. Siraj and Jamila huddled around their father, looking at him in wide-eyed wonder.

Faridah looked at her husband, smiled and got on with her chores. Majid looked at his children for a while and grinned. Trembling with a happiness that he could not translate, he hugged them tight. He knew in his heart that he was given a promised sign. The day *shall* come.

Friday morning dawned with a lull in the air. Majid felt an unusual urge to go to the mosque in the city. After noon prayers, on his way back, he saw somebody lying face down on the roadside. Majid turned him over and was shocked to see dried blood on the young boy’s face. He scooped up the unconscious boy, waved down a truck and headed for the nearest hospital. Once there, he handed him over to the casualty ward and waited anxiously outside. He feared he would get into trouble. As Majid was about to retreat, a doctor talking into his mobile, gestured for him to wait. His heart fluttered till he felt nauseous and dizzy. Sweat broke on his forehead and his throat went dry.

A dazzling black jaguar screeched to a halt outside the hospital. A flustered looking middle aged Arab got out from the car. His countenance was the epitome of worry. He adjusted his *ogal*, wrapped his black robe that kept on slipping as he hurried in. Majid watched in trepidation as the Arab swept past him and disappeared into the casualty unit. Although he knew in his heart that he had done no wrong, an unknown fear gripped his innermost being. As he was about to gather all his strength to run away, the Arab came out with the doctor whom Majid had seen earlier speaking into the mobile phone. He pointed at Majid and there was some animated talk between him and the Arab who gestured for Majid to come over. Majid stood rooted to the spot. The Arab came close to him and took Majid’s mottled hand in his and kissed it. Majid was too stupefied to resist or understand what was happening.

“*Allahu Akbar!* Otherwise my son would have died on the roadside. He is the one who sent you in time. What’s your name?” asked the Arab with quivering lips.

“Majid.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a cobbler.”

“Where do you live?”

“In Panar. I’m a bedoun.”

The Arab looked stunned and pondered over something before recovering his voice.

“Who do you have?”

“My wife and three small children.”

“Why don’t you pick them and come to my home? You can be my gardener. I shall take care of your children’s education and your wife shall have some comfort.”

Majid could not believe his ears. Suddenly he remembered the twinkling star. Surely it was more than a coincidence. He knew that God had decided to put an end to his misery. His face streaming with tears, he fell to his knees and bowed to *Makkah*.

Contributors

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Elone Natumanya Ainebyoona is a Ugandan development worker who writes for pleasure in Runyakitara as well as in English. She has had published her poetry and her adult and children's fiction. Elone has a degree in Adult and Community education from Kyambogo University, Uganda. She is currently a programme officer with the Ugandan National NGO Forum and is compiling a set of poems which she hopes to have published one day.

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Davina Kawuma was born in Lusaka and grew up in Kampala. She used to be afraid of poetry but not anymore. She wishes she had written *Godhorse*, *The Laugher*, *The Blue Bouquet*, *Black Mamba Boy*, *Desertion*, *Perfume* and *House of Leaves*. In her perfect world, she would write novellas during her lunch break and publish them before going to bed. Davina has written articles for *African Woman* and is working on a collection of short stories.

Oyet Sisto Ocen is his mother's third child, but ironically "Sisto" means 'sixth' in Italian! He grew up in northern Uganda and currently resides in Lamwo. Having gained a diploma in Clinical medicine and Community health, he worked with humanitarian agencies in South Sudan. After witnessing the destruction caused by HIV/AIDS in Uganda he became a medical officer for, Lamwo Rock Foundation for Children and Youth, a charity which exists to support orphans of the disease. His favourite writers are Chinua Achebe and Binyavanga Wainaina. He is currently working on a novel about his time in South Sudan.

Emmanuel Monychol was born on the outskirts of a town called Tonj in South Sudan. He has studied in South Sudan and Uganda and is currently taking an MSc in Media management in the United Kingdom. Monychol admires writers such as, Thomas Hardy, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Thiong'o, Ousmane Sembène, George Orwell, Chinua Achebe, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Thomas Mofolo, Henry Rider Haggard, Mariama Bâ, Mongo Beti, Okot p'Bitek, Nii Parkes and Gorreti Kyomuhendo. He has been published by the Kwani Trust and Studio Edirisa. Emmanuel devotes most of his free time to writing.

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Hellen Nyana grew up in Kampala, Uganda and as a child, when she was not playing kwepena (dodgeball), she was reading a book. She went to Makerere University where she studied Literature and Communication skills. Hellen has worked in Uganda's leading media houses as a freelance writer, sub-editor and columnist. Currently, Hellen works as the group magazine editor for the Madhvani Group and resides in Kakira, Jinja District. She enjoys the works of Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, Elizabeth Gilbert and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Harriet Anena is a writer and editor. She was born in Gulu, northern Uganda. She graduated from Makerere University in 2010 after pursuing a BA in Mass Communication. She is undertaking an MA in Human rights. She works as a sub-editor for the *Daily Monitor* newspaper. Harriet discovered her passion for poetry in 2001, after writing her award winning poem – 'The Plight of the Acholi Child.' Growing up during the twenty year war in northern Uganda has influenced her early writing. Harriet currently runs a flash fiction blog: anenah.wordpress.com.

Joanita Male was born and raised in Kampala, Uganda. She lives with her parents and two dogs and is inspired by them every day. She grew up reading Enid Blyton, but later took interest in other writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Billy Kahora. She is currently working on a few short stories which she hopes to one day to compile into a book.

Sophie Nuwagira Bamwoyeraki was born in southwestern Uganda, Mbarara. She grew up in Kinoni, Rwampara, but later moved to Kampala after graduating from Makerere University. Sophie holds a Masters in Education and currently teaches at Kampala International School Uganda. She has co-authored text books for secondary schools. She admires, Simon Armitage, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Goretta Kyomuhendo, Sujata Bhatt, Carol Ann Duffy, Antonio Jacinto and Natasha Tretheway. She has had poems and short stories published in various collections. Sophie is currently compiling a poetry anthology.

Sneha Susan Shibu is from the sleepy town of Alleppey/Alappuzha, also known as the Venice of the East, in Kerala, south India. She is a homemaker and has a Bachelor of Education in English and a Masters in English literature. She loves photography and observing nature. Her favourite writers include, J.M Coetzee, A.J Cronin, C.S Lewis, H.H Munro and Arundhati Roy. Sneha has written humorous stories for children and is working on two novellas.