

Deconfining: An Anthology of Voices from Africa and Europe



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BE TOGETHER

How can we bring together cultural practitioners, artists, policymakers, and audiences from two continents – Europe and Africa – and make them contribute to a better understanding of social, political and economic confinement patterns from different viewpoints? How can we know each other if we live on different continents, speak different languages, and practice different cultures? How can we collaborate if we do not know other people's art, cannot travel, cannot present our projects elsewhere, and cannot find a way to communicate? How can we be present outside of our city or country if we do not get to know other countries and their people, and cross all boundaries that divide us?

A four-year EU-funded project, named DECONFINING, gathered 12 partners in 11 countries bringing together cultural practitioners, artists, policymakers, and audiences from two continents – Europe and Africa. To better understand social, political and economic confinement patterns from different viewpoints, the project explores and develops new ways of intercontinental artistic and cultural cooperation providing better access and information for intercontinental mobility and co-creation. Over 250 artists, 2,500 cultural organization representatives, and 400 cultural stakeholders across two continents, and more than 30 countries, are working together to develop an inclusive, sustainable, and participatory framework of cooperation between Europe and Africa, which may later extended to other regions of the world. The project is innovative in developing and testing new ways of intercontinental cultural cooperation furthering the transnational creation and circulation of visual, new media, and performing art works between the European and African continents. To understand each other better and to be closer to each other, we are changing old practices, at least in the world of art and culture.

This anthology is symbolically the fingerprint of our project. In the anthology are printed our obsessive themes related to the traumatic world we live in, our traumas, our hopes, our questions to which we do not know the answers and preconceived answers to once-lost questions. Through the texts published in the anthology – awarded at the literary

competition, created in the writer's residencies, or written for the needs of the project– we can read a wide variety of stories that connect us or separate us, and talk about illegal migration, prejudices, the position of women on two continents, the problems of memories, the impossibility of movement, social and political taboos, misunderstandings and strong needs that European and African people find a common language through the art.

Whether they won a writer's competition for short stories (held by Croatian National Theatre "Ivan Zajc" from Rijeka), participated in the Deconfining Writers' Residencies (one organized by National Kaunas Drama Theatre and other by Salzkammergut 2024 and Operndorf Afrika – Village Opera), or simply wrote text on relevant topics through debates, mind maps, lectures, and workshops, they explored common themes, keywords, and narratives that transcend continents. Their collaborative efforts led to the creation of literary texts that, despite describing personal experiences from different parts of the world, share interconnected emotions and values.

Therefore, this anthology will not remain in the archives of EU projects only as a memory of the four-year program of rapprochement between Europe and Africa through culture, but as a literary testimony of real questions, doubts, hopes, and topics that have arisen in these traumatic pandemics and post-pandemic times on two continents that are separated at the closest geographical point by only 14 km and centuries of historical and political misunderstanding.

EDITOR

DUBRAVKA VRGOČ

DIALOG BETWEEN CONTINENTS: POLAND, HUNGARY AND ZAMBIA

Art Transparent (Poland), Pro Progressione (Hungary), and the Women's History Museum (Zambia) embarked on a collaborative journey to explore the themes of closeness and distance between Central-Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Africa. This transcontinental initiative sought to examine how shared histories, cultural interactions, and individual experiences intersect and diverge across these regions. Their efforts culminated in the publication of the e-book *Narratives of Closeness and Distance from Central-Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Africa – a Multicontextual Patchwork*, which brings together voices from both continents in a rich exploration of identity, memory, and belonging.

The project began with an open call for submissions, inviting writers, researchers, and artists to reflect on the complexities of connection and separation. This call encouraged contributors to delve into themes such as historical entanglements, personal and collective memory, and the ways in which space and place shape human experience. The responses, marked by their diversity and depth, revealed a tapestry of perspectives that highlight both shared struggles and unique cultural contexts.

The publication was carefully curated and edited by Urszula Markowska-Manista and Natasha Omokhodion, who brought their expertise and sensitivity to crafting a collection that bridges regional differences while celebrating individual creativity. The eight essays included in the e-book represent a multicontextual dialogue that sheds light on the fluid and often complex relationships between regions, histories, and people.

From these eight texts, four were selected for inclusion in the anthology *Deconfining Arts, Culture, Politics in Europe and*

Africa. These essays, chosen for their alignment with the broader project's themes, capture the essence of the dialogue between continents and offer profound insights into the project's overarching vision.

Karolina Bieniek & Kamil Kawalec's *Bizarre Tropes* (Poland) examines cultural stereotypes and the ways they influence perceptions of "otherness." Shilika Chisoko's *Undoing the Knots of Place and Space* (Zambia) explores the intersections of identity and geography, delving into the personal and political implications of displacement and belonging. Klara Wojtkowska's *How I Learned to Pray* (Poland) reflects on spirituality and cultural transmission, offering a deeply personal narrative that resonates across cultures. Nyimbili Suzyika's *The Place of Theatre as a Medium of Memory* (Zambia) investigates how performance art serves as a vessel for preserving and transmitting collective memory in a rapidly changing world.

These essays collectively reflect the spirit of the project, embodying the intricate interplay of closeness and distance. They emphasize the value of cross-cultural dialogue and demonstrate how art, research, and storytelling can serve as tools for fostering understanding and dismantling barriers. This collaborative effort between Art Transparent, Pro Progressione, and the Women's History Museum not only bridges continents but also opens a space for creative and intellectual exchange. By focusing on the themes of connection and separation, the initiative contributes to a deeper understanding of the shared and divergent experiences that shape our global community.

DR. KAROLINA BIENIEK

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Dr. Karolina Bieniek is Director of the ART TRANSPARENT Foundation, Doctor of Social Sciences, a specialist in foreign policy and cultural diplomacy. She has experience in organising work and managing projects with a value of EUR 2+ million, including dozens of cultural and social ventures of regional, national and international scope. Her special focus is on building sustainable European– African relations. She co-organised events as part of the European Culture Congress and co-authored Wrocław's application in the 2016 European Capital of Culture competition. Graduate of the TANDEM international programme for cultural managers and the BASECAMP Eastern Europe's Central Asia 2021 School of System Change, winner of the "30 Creative Wrocławians 2017" competition, member of the Central Europe Coordination Group of the Bosch Alumni Network from 2021 to 2022.

DR. KAROLINA BIENIEK

BIZARRE TROPES

A CONVERSATION WITH DR. KAROLINA BIENIEK,
DIRECTOR OF THE ART TRANSPARENT FOUNDATION

Interviewed by KAMIL KAWALEC

What is your experience of artistic collaboration with Tanzania?

When the opportunity arose in my professional life to work internationally with a partner organisation on the African continent, my thoughts immediately turned to Tanzania. I have a special relationship with this country. Since 2005, I've been involved in various private and professional activities there. The possibility of long-term collaboration and cultural and artistic exchange offered by the four-year *Deconfining* project inspired me to look for a partner organisation capable of meeting the challenges of this large and complex undertaking. Many years of professional experience outside Europe as well as on other continents have taught me that in such situations, it's best to rely on referrals and recommendations from well-wishers and face-to-face meetings. Incidentally, I'd previously worked in the African Great Lakes region, researching while also implementing aid activities. Therefore regarding *Deconfining* I relied on people who know the atmosphere of Dar es Salaam much better than I do – former residents of Tanzania's second capital. Thanks to Helena Goldon, I learned about the Nafasi Art Space – a wonderful NGO resem-

bling Art Transparent's profile. Together with Rebecca Yeong Ae Corey and Lilian Hipolyte, we had several online meetings and discussed scenarios for possible collaborations. In the beginning, it was not at all clear that the work would bind us for years.

The organisation of the cooperation with Zambia was very similar. I knew that Karolina Łągiewka lived and worked there – we'd already collaborated in the implementation of support activities connected with the UNESCO World Book Capital Conakry 2017. It was Karolina who introduced me to Samba Yonga and Natasha Omokhodion of the Women's History Museum in Lusaka, with whom we're currently working on a book as part of this project.

What is your view on how this collaboration is unfolding? How much have you managed to achieve and how much still needs to be worked out?

We started working on the *Deconfining* project with a very large group of NGOs from both continents. It was in June 2019 when, as part of the preparatory programme for the European Capital of Culture Rijeka 2020, Sylvia Amann invited us to a conference on European–African networking ideas. Since we as Art Transparent had already carried out activities in this area, for example as part of the aforementioned UNESCO World Book Capital Conakry 2017, we had plenty of reasons to share our experience. The next step was to prepare an application in response to a call for large-scale projects and collaborations within the Creative Europe programme, which took our consortium more than six months. In the end, we submitted this extremely complex application in 2021 and were fortunate enough to be able to start implementing the project in June 2022. It's a very long process, but it was only after all the agreements had

been signed and the very complicated organisational phase was over that we were able to move on to the most interesting part of the activity, which was and is the implementation of the objectives of this collaboration. We are now (at the time of this interview) in the first year of a four-year collaboration (2022–2026). As project partners, we've held two open calls: one for texts to be published together with the Women's History Museum Zambia, and another for residencies in Poland and Tanzania. The results are fascinating. We are working with many very interesting people. I feel **we're bridging the gaps, connecting the dots between our regions of the world, however we're still at the beginning of the journey.**

One of the sources of inspiration for your research is the book *Bizary* by Ewa Szumańska. To what extent have African countries' relations with Europe changed from what Szumańska describes?

I became “infected” by Ewa Szumańska's literary works when I was carrying out a series of activities revolving around Professor Leon Podsiadły of the Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, who'd spent five years working as a teacher in Conakry, Guinea. The professor was always close to our initiatives and, as a member of the Wrocław Group, often visited the Mieszkanie Gepperta gallery run by Art Transparent. During exhibition openings and many meetings in his home and studio, he told us extraordinary stories about people connected with Wrocław who'd dedicated part of their lives and work to different regions of Africa. My favourite stories, however, were those connected with his experience of leaving the reality of communist Poland for Guinea–Conakry, which was about to regain its independence; his work at a local school of arts and crafts, his relationship with Guinean

students and, finally, his Polish–Guinean search for the capital of the Mali Empire.

In 2017, I came across a great book published by the Wrocław-based publishing house Warstwy – Ewa Szumańska's *Bizary*. I knew the story of the legendary “Studio 202” radio show and Szumańska's years-long series “From the Diary of a Young Doctor,” despite that, I was completely unaware that she was first and foremost a passionate traveller. I was fascinated by her way of looking at the world, her insightfulness and her empathetic view of Africa, which was similar to Podsiadły's.

Reflecting on these two subjective accounts led to a question about how two distant regions of the world, Central Europe and East Africa, look at and perceive each other. This question is echoed in the title of a publication that is part of the Deconfining project: *Narratives of Closeness and Distance From Central-Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Africa – A Multicontextual Patchwork*, which is being prepared under the editorship of Dr Urszula Markowska–Manista and Natasha Omokhodion.

Do you recall any of the stories Professor Podsiadły told you?

Yes, he talked a lot about the mid-1960s. His stories were full of characters from Wrocław, such as the actors Zbyszek Cybulski and Feliks Podsiadły, Leon's brother. We wrote about them in the catalogue published by Art Transparent after the *Bel Air* exhibition at the Mieszkanie Gepperta gallery [*Bel Air, Leon Podsiadły*, 2020, Wrocław]. I was particularly impressed by the story of the making of Stanisław Lenartowicz's film *Full Ahead*. The director, in collaboration with Ewa Szumańska, shot the film during a voyage on a Polish ship from Szczecin, with stops in the Canary

Islands, Dakar and the islands around Conakry, among others. Podsiadły spoke of the bravado of the legendary Zbigniew Cybulski in Conakry and the elegance of Teresa Tuszyńska. Let's not forget that this was at a time when making films in such remote places was not a matter of course! Another story concerned the cooperation of Polish scientists from Szczecin, Professors Władysław Filipowiak and Bogusław Szerniewicz, with Professor Djibril Tamsir Niane in the organisation of archaeological expeditions in search of the capital of the Mali Empire (1962, 1964–65, 1967–68, 1973–74, 1978). During these expeditions, the painting skills of Leon's brother Feliks were particularly appreciated by the researchers. The artists were responsible for documenting the artefacts found during the excavations. By the way, Leon and his brother Feliks sometimes travelled to the interior of the country with Polish and Guinean scientists, for example, to prepare an exhibition in Conakry dedicated to Guinean cultures. There are many such stories. To this day, people living in these places fondly remember the Polish and Central European teachers, lecturers, town planners and engineers who, in the second half of the 20th century, carried out educational and commercial projects in many parts of Africa.

What do you think is our contemporary perspective on African-European relations? Do we still have the same stereotypes about Africa or have they changed?

I think that our perceptions of each other are still based on stereotypes, which fortunately are beginning to be challenged. However, I would like to stress that stereotyping is present not only in the Central European perspective on Africa – it works both ways. Anyway, if you want to focus on stereotypes, you have to know that they are completely natural for any human being who has to

function in one way or another in a very complex world. Nonetheless, I want to believe that the processes of globalisation are giving us a chance for a breakthrough, and that technology is creating unprecedented opportunities for getting to know each other, co-operating directly, and thus challenging stereotypes. This is what projects like *Deconfining* are about. Books, meetings, video works, performances and ultimately podcasts or interviews – give audiences the chance to take a broad view of geographically distant regions from multiple perspectives.

Anna Szpakowska-Kujawska also kept a diary during her travels to Africa. What can we learn from her notes?

When we opened the *Bel Air* exhibition in our Mieszkanie Gepperta gallery in 2017, I was approached by Mrs Anna Szpakowska-Kujawska, a wonderful artist from Wrocław, also a member of the Wrocław Group, who said that, like Podsiadły, she'd spent almost seven years of her life in West Africa. She told me about the book she wrote and self-published after that stay entitled *Ekundayo czyli droga* [Ekundayo or The Road], but she never mentioned her travel diaries. It was not until 2023, when her exhibition was being organised at Mieszkanie Gepperta, that she admitted that she still had the unpublished diaries of her stay in Nigeria and her travels to neighbouring countries. When Anna visited the Foundation's office one day, we received a copy of these very interesting texts, full of descriptions of an Africa that no longer exists, having completely changed over the last fifty years. What I found particularly appealing in Szpakowska-Kujawska's account was her sensitivity to the people, especially the women she met in Nigeria, as well as to Nigerian culture and art. In the second volume

of the diaries, I also came across the story of her trip to Tanzania, her fascination with the country and her incredible expedition to the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro. I thought about all the cultural tropes known from popular literature and cinema – from Karen Blixen's *A Farewell to Africa* to Corinne Hofmann's *The White Masai* – that are common to us in Europe, including Eastern Europe. I began to wonder about this fascination with East Africa within European cultures and its reception on the other side of the equator. This provoked the question of how our Central European ways of looking at East Africa differ from the Western ways, which dominate media coverage.

Szumańska's or Szpakowska-Kujawska's accounts seem to be directly connected with your travel experiences. What do you think is worth highlighting here?

Above all, what strikes me is that all three of us are travellers from Wrocław, from the heart of Central Europe, who go to seemingly unusual places and like to talk about them. I like to think that our stories are about the world as we encounter it, as opposed to the currently popular trend of talking about ourselves when travelling. I have a great appreciation for the stories of women travellers, as they tend to demonstrate a very different sensibility to the stories of men. Finally, I'm fascinated by the biographies of Szumańska and Szpakowska-Kujawska – women who, at a time when having a passport and the means to travel far were not given, were able to carry out such logistically difficult projects. It is also interesting to note that, despite our love of far-flung travels, all of us linked our professional lives to culture and the arts.

The image of Szpakowska-Kujawska's visit to the village project of the Austrian-Nigerian artist Susanne Wenger never leaves my mind. Thanks to Wenger's work, an area

of great importance to Yoruba culture was saved. Her social and artistic involvement led to the protection of seventy-five hectares of sacred groves and small shrines dedicated to local deities. Her project became her life. Before that, I had no idea that someone from my immediate environment witnessed this amazing work of art in the Yoruba village.

Another thing that is important to me is my fascination with how women look at the world. Nobody describes the women they encounter like these two authors. The stories of how they lived and loved, stories about ambition, meaning and passing, have made a huge impression on me. To add to that, our partner in this project is the Women's History Museum in Lusaka. We still know too little about both African countries and Polish and African herstories. I hope we can change that.

You talk about many interesting stories connecting our part of Europe with different African countries. When preparing the Deconfining project, did you also think about any differences or tensions that could arise during its implementation?

I think we're just beginning to find that out. This project has been created to get to know each other in action. Anyone reading our application, which won funding from the Creative Europe programme, will have noticed that the verb "test" is repeated a lot. That is no coincidence. First of all, it's important to realise that the fact that we don't know how to deal with potential differences is due to insufficient knowledge about each other. In official documents, these differences are always presented in terms of crisis or conflict, never in terms of diversity and cooperation. Hence the idea of approaching the issue of cooperation in an alternative way poses many difficulties. Unfortunately, inequalities arise even at the point of applying for funds,

when it turns out that out of fifty-seven African countries, only two are eligible to participate. As a consequence, we spent a lot of time trying to come up with a project model that would meet the funder's criteria.

As part of the Deconfining project, the Art Transparent Foundation in cooperation with the Nafasi Art Space has selected a group of six artists from Europe and Africa whom we will meet during the 22nd edition of the SURVIVAL Art Review in Wrocław. What themes can we expect to find in their video works? Are their works about identity, politics, ecology? How are these notions presented?

As we speak, this part of the project is still to come. We know the names of the artists selected through an open call for residencies in Poland and Tanzania. This book will be their guide. These six artists from East Africa and Central Europe will produce new, original video works exploring the links between the former communist bloc countries and the African governments of the time, which are not obvious from today's perspective. Traces of these links can be found, for example, in the architectural monuments that still exist today, such as Tanzania. Some of the artists will look for differences and similarities in the field of culture – for example, in handicrafts or dance in both regions of the world. Others will focus on social issues, such as women's rights or health and hygiene.

Why did we choose the medium of video art? The reason is that one of the limitations of circulating works of art worldwide is their high cost. Knowing that the international transport of art objects is an extremely complicated process, we decided with the curators that for the good of the project that we would narrow down the medium. We hope that the resulting video works will allow us to look at each other and get to know each other better, but above all – that they will be easily accessible to the general public.

It seems to me that the notion of the “other” concerning African countries has been exhausted. Can we replace it with a reflection on how to build the “common”?

Interestingly, art from East Africa is not present in Poland, while at the same time, art from Central and Eastern Europe is unknown and invisible in Africa. We don't know much about each other, although, as you can see, we have long-standing relations. I can name just a handful of people, significant initiatives or projects intended to change this state of affairs – and we live in a large European country. Therefore a project like Deconfining aims to explore these two perspectives. Like our partners from other European cities (e.g. Bad Ischl [AT], Bodo [N], Budapest [HU], Kaunas [LT] or Rijeka [HR]), we are working with our Tanzanian and Zambian partners to deconstruct myths and build stable relationships between our cultural institutions. We want to get to know the current African discourse, so we organise individual study visits and online meetings to find out what issues contemporary Kenyan, Tanzanian and Rwandan art is addressing. From there we try to address the question of proximity and distance.

When I first flew to East Africa in 2005, not many had heard of Poland, and if anyone associated us with anything, it was with the fall of communism and Lech Wałęsa. That image has changed over the years. Today, on the beaches of Zanzibar, Polish is as common as English or German. However, what do we know about each other? Children in Polish schools hear more about Staś and Nel [fictional children characters from H. Sienkiewicz's novel *In Desert and Wilderness*] and *Afryka Kazika* [book by Ł. Wierzbicki] – literary portrayals of the African continent from a century or more ago – than about the real problems of today's youngest

continent, where more than half of the one billion inhabitants are under eighteen. It's a continent that is the most vulnerable to the costs of climate change, and yet it's proving to be quite stable and predictable, contrary to existing stereotypes. We want to come up with an unbiased storytelling that can bring us together – here in Central Europe and there in East Africa.

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Journals. Selfpublishing.

KLARA ANA ROSA (WOJTKOWSKA)

Klara Ana Rosa (Wojtkowska) is a musician, director, writer, storyteller/actor, teacher and traditional ceremonialist. Her work revolves around ceremony-ritual theatre, cooking music, wisdom and visions to create new and living stories and ceremonies. She is the founder of Mhondoro Dreams Productions, which produced the Polish-Zimbabwean film NZARA-HUNGER in 2020 – screened at the prestigious Gdynia Film Festival in Poland in 2021. She is the author of Wild Medicine: A Journey to Zimbabwe, Ceremony Theatre: Mystical Texts for the Human and Non-Human Worlds, Będziemy się za was Modlić: z Polski do Zimbabwe Ścieżkami Przodków, 'Teatr Ceremonii: Opowieści dla Ludzi i Przodków' and various music albums, including Moon Songs for Elephants and BANGIZA 1+2. Her work builds a bridge between Zimbabwe and Poland and beyond, and she is also the director of the annual mythological Nyamatsatse Festival.

More at: www.nyamatsatsefestival.org
and www.klaraanarosa.org

KLARA ANA ROSA WOJTKOWSKA

HOW I LEARNED TO PRAY

A FICTIONAL MEMOIR

Unlike my four siblings, I was born an immigrant, the strange sort, you know. Born between countries, in the cradle of my people's enemies, rather than their refuge. I was born among Germans, who once tried to exterminate my Polish grandparents. I lived there for only two weeks, sandwiched between the love and fear of my parents, sleeping and feeding and absorbing the stresses of my Polish family before I was taken across yet another border in the cold, dark recess of a cardboard box. Oblivious, helpless, and packaged, I was taken to another country not my own. The United States. I was born a Polish citizen, to Polish parents, yet, from the beginning, it appears, I had no home.

Immigrants speak a common language. We read signs, glean multiple languages, feel the environment with a sixth sense, not striving to fit in, no, but walking that tightrope of being yourself and being a person. Being yourself – the foreigner. Being a new person – becoming recognisable enough to your environment to grant you the human dignity you need to survive.

We immigrants come in all shapes and sizes, true, but we never assume that we are home. That the place we are physically in belongs to us. We never take home for granted. Rather, we are always looking for it, in moments, in tastes, in smells, and in the language of our birth. We know that home is an elusive phenomenon, and this can make us a little paranoid. Additionally, media and immigration do spawn a particular kind of paranoia, especially when migrant numbers are bolstered by war or famine. But when we are comfortable and feel at home, when paranoia

does not eat at the frayed edges of our anxious dreams, then we are the most open and friendly people you will find. We have a particular eye and ear for welcoming otherness. We know it is necessary. We are not threatened by it. This is why, in all of the shouting of the times, repeated images on TV, headlines scrolling the newspapers with words like Migrants! Exiles! Refugees! Asylum seekers! and all of that nonsense – I maintain that immigrants are God's gift to a nation. We may be a difficult gift, yes, but a gift nonetheless. There is nobody who can serve as a prophet to a nation, except for one who first of all – has eyes and ears that see the people from the outside, that hold a particular vision and see the whole without the myopic blindness that being too much of an insider gives you. And secondly, we love that culture enough to learn it, to understand it, to invest in it. We immigrants, more than anyone else, know how to celebrate the culture that has given us a home. Because we are gifted with home, not born into it. Like converts everywhere, when they are not zealots, we are people who love and appreciate a new home on mature, adult terms. We know the difference between having a home and not having one. We give what we have to give because that is the basis of home.

It is no wonder, then, that I felt Zimbabwe to be my home from the very first time my feet touched her soil. Ten years ago, when I passed through the country on a journey hopping from bus to bus to bus – from Bulawayo to Victoria Falls, to Harare, to Maputo. At the time, I was performing for the Polish Diaspora in South Africa. Songs of immigrants, indeed! To me, Zimbabwe and Poland felt the same, the black birds circling the Soviet-style city buildings crackled their voices in the air in the same way, the morning sun smelled the same, the trees smiled and tossed about the manes of their glorious green crowns, here and there alike. This was where I met the mbira, the silver keys twinkling their songs jubilantly, waking the sleeping Ancestors. We have Ancestor ceremonies in Poland too, I thought, as I learned my first mbira songs. We also have songs that wake up the Ancestors and masks that we wear when we dance with them in Ceremony – just as in Zimbabwe, we pound the ngoma skins and mbira keys and dance wild dances until the Ancestors arrive.

The day I arrived, I walked to a market in Bulawayo. Underneath a bright blue, generous sky, I examined piles of dried mopane worms and spoke to the hawking women about their lives. They smiled a

lot and laughed a lot. The surrounding trees and birds seemed to smile and laugh as well. Nature loved its people, and the people loved nature. I saw a mbira for the first time. It looked so odd, a tablet with keys on it – yet immediately, it was familiar to me. As though I knew it from lifetimes past. It fit well and warmly into my hands, just like the violin.

I fell in love with Zimbabwe, because I love Poland. The two countries have the same Spirit at their root – a Spirit of honouring and loving the forests and the mountains and the waters. A Spirit of honouring the mermaids, who abound in Poland. A Spirit of storytelling and metaphor and the importance of language. I love Poland, and therefore will always love Zimbabwe. Both things are equally true and hold equal weight in my life.

I had no idea then, how deep, how far, these dimensions and times and places would go. That my Polish Ancestors were waiting for me in Zimbabwe, alongside a mermaid and a big lion.

Waiting for me to return.

WARSAWA, POLAND TWO YEARS EARLIER

July days are strange, I think to myself, sweating, as my feet pound the sidewalk dutifully, and I pick up my violin, still suffering at the luthier's in Warszawa. I refuse to call it War-saw – yes, we have seen war, but there is no need to emphasise our trauma. The name Warszawa comes from Wars i Sawa and the love between a fisherman and a mermaid that birthed the city.

I pass a wrinkled, dry sponge-in-a-bath, old man playing the violin in a corner. He seems unconvinced himself, his fingers falling arbitrarily on nonsensical notes – backtracking, repeating the same notes. Is he practising? Trying to remember? Where are the violin geniuses of today? The violin has fallen out of fashion, to be played by quasi-homeless shadows along the Wisła river. It used to be a ceremonial instrument. It used to be known to induce spiritual possession ... just like

the mbira. Cold and hungry, I look across to the coffee shop and dig into my pockets. I count twenty zlotys.

What do I do?

Where do I go?

Nothing in my life has worked out. I'm thirty. I have no skills except for playing the fiddle; no income, and a body not strong enough to go West for manual labour – likely picking strawberries or taking care of the elderly. Something inside of me responds to this ill feeling with a familiar death wish. Maybe I shouldn't be here at all? I don't know who else to be. The Ancients said our destiny was written in the stars. I always imagined it to be grand, wonderful and meaningful. But where is the meaning in my life now?

I go into the coffee shop to ask about a job. Again.

A man with a towel on his shoulder shakes his head, and I feel the nerves in my stomach sizzle unpleasantly, then hollow out as if a giant dragon had just taken a sumptuous bite out of my intestines.

Coffee shops don't want violinists anymore.

Violinists are a dime a dozen these days, and nobody knows their purpose anymore. I have been taught music, yes, but I am longing for its power.

I was taught that music was a nice thing and that if you are good at it, then you could potentially make it your job, get paid money and survive by doing it. I played on the streets of Warsaw and Sweden and the UK and Ireland, and collected coins and bills into my violin case; I learned in music schools and from teachers and played Wieniawski's 'Legend' at my brother's funeral and my aunt's. I was taught that music was important and beautiful in the cultural sense – but I was never taught about its power.

There were slight intimations, sure. Very slight.

In the story of Beethoven, I was taught not about the power of his music, but the power of the man who overcame a disability, to keep himself close to music. In the story of Wieniawski's Legend, I was taught that it is possible to move somebody through music so much that they change their mind about an important issue.

But the power of music? Something that makes it worth

engaging in; over business, or law, or medicine? Why would a young adult put down their phone in favour of a violin? Isn't the phone also a means of communication? And aren't both simply tools of entertainment? Entertainment is good, sure. But it's not power. It's not the same as bombing a country, or being president, or having people do what you say. Singing songs doesn't seem like a very serious business. In fact, it seems like something that the whole world has declared it can do without – look at how musicians are treated, not paid, disrespected.

In a culture without ceremony, musicians cannot know their power.

A bird suddenly slams against the window. There is no work for me here. I have no power.

My legs grow weak, and I sit down for a moment. A moment later, a tall African woman approaches me. Glowing. There is no other word to describe her. Her beauty is so brilliant, that for a moment, I suspect she is a ghost. I hear her laugh tinkle, and it makes me look around. Did she answer my thought?

She lowers her head as she passes by. "There is a place waiting for you..." she says.

Did she whisper this?

"There is a place waiting for you... ask your Ancestors where to go. They will tell you."

She repeats herself. Still and sure. Then gone. The unwashed windows blink like the tired glasses of a surprised librarian.

Ask my Ancestors. As far as I'm concerned, Ancestors are for people with nice families. My family is as bitter as an early-felled apple. Rotten. Too late to grow into anything sweet. Too early to save our hopes for the next lifetime. Scattered across the world, traumatised by the violence and cruelty of a childhood spent training in destroying one another, we have little use, need, or desire for contact. This I've noticed – Slavic people have a powerful Ancestral tradition, and yet the most traumatised and sad families I've seen anywhere.

So, who are these Ancestors?

I ruminate, while the sun sets and the greasy windows blush with rosy glee.

I close my eyes...

The Slavic Ancestors, alive in our 'motanka' dolls protect the home, and any person desire or destiny that you choose. The Slavic Ancestors, dance alongside the river, before throwing in the Marzanna doll in order to guarantee fertility for both people and nature. The Slavic Ancestors living in Mokosz, the queen of the Earth, the wet one, the Great Mother...

Do they mean anything to me? Do they know who I am? Can I – I, their descendant talk to them? Implore them?

I breathe again in prayer, “Where do I go?”

The bell on the door rings, and a tall man walks into the coffee shop. His hands are full of phones, his voice loud as a morning alarm, and his steps so concrete that dreams dissipate like a fog in the breath of the sun. I'm startled. A waitress leans over to wipe my table, “Would you like to order anything?”. She knows that I will say no. Again.

The tall man pats the counter impatiently, turning towards me slightly. He winks in my direction and I blush. It's not common here, to be addressed so obviously. On his T-shirt, the words “Göttingen, Germany” reach for me. My breath catches. My birthplace.

The Ancestors are here. They are knocking.

My aunt used to read me the *Fisherman and the Golden Fish* when I was a child. I loved that story. The book had a cover so old that the picture was barely visible. A dolphin? A harp? Neither? The threads of the book were so loose, like stories searching for good endings. I would ask for this story again and again, always hoping that at the end, this time, the wife would get a settlement. The greedy wife perhaps, wouldn't become God, but she could still have a nice house. She could still be happy.

Aha! Could I ever be happy? In this grey land? Was I the wife who wanted too much?

“Tell me a story!”, cries the child on the train. I'm on my way now. I'm on my way to the root of the root, and the mouth of my terrible river. I'm going to the place where I was born.

“Tell me a story!”, cries the child again.

*A story? I know a story...
Once upon a time...*

And the thread is woven, tucked neatly into the story of the fisherman and the golden fish who grants him wishes, and every day he returns with another, more magnificent wish from his greedy wife...

The child falls asleep. The mother, a woman with a tired face and red earrings, looks grateful for the reprieve and closes her eyes too.

I look out the train window. The story is not about greed at all. The story is about a woman who recognises when she is being short-changed. Why? Because she's been fed illusions all along. Why? Because she was not the one creating her own life. And so, at the end of the story, when the Fisherman's Wife asks to be made God, she is put back into her life – exactly at that place where she was before – so that she can now design it. So that her Soul can create, and truly be God, not simply a recipient of blessings from that less-than-ideal-translator of her desires, her husband. And even the Gods of the Sea knew this. They looked at the Fisherman's wife, and said: "Bless you, bless you, bless you, Queen."

That Woman was a Wise Woman indeed.

Like her, I travel now to bargain with the Ancestors who ushered me into this world, my mbira light, small and strong in my hand, the wood and metal solid and affirming – compared to the heavy, yet delicate violin. The rhythms and melodies of this Zimbabwean instrument are exotic here, and playing it has gotten me more than a few gigs.

The trees whiz by outside as if they are the ones on a train and I am the one sitting still, in the centre of the world. I pluck a few notes, and the air changes; shimmers, colours. Some Spirit stirs. I now know what I will be asking for: a home, a place where I can create.

I doze off, lulled by the rhythm of steel wheels gliding on steel tracks. In my distant dream, figures appear. All kinds. Women, men, light beings. Their laughter sounds like many mbiras made of colour, made of light. The sounds intensify, until I feel that I am turned into a giant mbira, playing the songs and rhythms of my soul and interweaving them with the song and rhythm of the Universe. My body starts vibrating. When I think that I will explode from the intensity of the vibration, I hear these words:

"You are a shaman."

I'm a what?

"You are a ceremonialist."

How?

"Go to Zimbabwe. They will explain things to you there..."

My hand, relaxed by sleep, unconsciously relaxes, and the mbira thuds on the carpeted floor of the train – keys ringing.

Zimbabwe.

Fine, fine. I say, fine.

Göttingen, Germany. Why Göttingen? A city whose name I can scarcely pronounce? I am here for only two weeks. Not long enough to learn any language, to be granted any citizenship, or to be given a real chance. Why did I come here the way I did? If nothing is a coincidence in life, then certainly the manner of arrival in this world, and place of birth cannot be random.

The closer we get now, to this magical place as the train wheels spin my fate like the Great Goddess spins destiny, the more the air seems to calm inside and outside of myself. As if I have crossed a border into an idyllic land that only exists sometimes, in moments, when the world closes its eyes and breathes peacefully. The green is greener here, the flowers are more intense. I feel as if I am swimming through goodness.

In Africa, it is well known that bargaining for your life cannot happen without the presence of the spirits who saw you through the portal. In Africa, the place where all of us originated, this is well known. This is why, every person must, at some point, go back to their own beginning. As the shaman who changed everything later told me: "your home is somewhere else."

Here is the truth: I am going to bargain for my life now. That is my intention. I have nothing to impress with: bags of dirty clothes, a mbira, an exhausted body, a fear for my travels, a fear for my life. Where should I go now? I still ask. Where is my place in the world? Does it exist? Or am I like millions of others, young people, disillusioned by politics, tradition, religion, profession, psychology, and more politics, more tradition, more religion, more professions and pop psychologies. Yet, the exhaustion I

feel for my quality of life; the skating over thin surfaces, the lack of roots and stability, the strange dissociation between me and others, the lack of home, the strange loneliness that is starting to settle into the air I breathe, the food I eat, the obsessions, the sadness, the strange death wish that has haunted me for so many years now, off and on – all of that, surely can be bargained for. In the place of my birth. Maybe the spirits there have been searching for their child for all of these years. Maybe they are waiting for me. In Germany, or maybe in Zimbabwe? Maybe they are the ones who can give me life, now that it seems that the only thing possible in my life is death.

I have lost every hand I have played. Africa breaks me every time I go – and yes, I have been. There is some sadness in me that I can't shake, and some suicidal fantasy that is only growing. A sadness I see in the faces of the people around me – in the stores, on the sidewalks, in the schools, on the screens... a sadness that I see in my own country, addicted to war and memories of war. Why do they call it 'Warsaw', after all? Why can't they call it Warszawa, like the story goes, about the fisherman and the mermaid and their great love that birthed the city... Why do they have to call it WAR-SAW? As if we need a reminder. The ghosts of my dead ancestors have haunted me since before I was born. How many people in my country, my age, can say the same?

Desires haunt me. Desires that I hate myself for, for my inability to either fulfil them or give them up – a dissociation from God and the Spirit. Life indeed owes us nothing, maybe, but I want life, I do. I want life, a real human life. That or death. I don't want this strange in-between anymore. So I am going to bargain for my life. To say my words and pray my prayers and try my best for them to not be heard as a complaint. To impress the spirits of the lonely land I am going to, where there is a huge old and famous university. I never hear about the spirits of Göttingen, no. I hear about astronomers, mathematicians and physicists. There is little else that I know about the place.

Who is waiting for me there, on the other side of Time?

I don't know how to pray. In my country, prayer is for the zealots, for the fanatics, for the cruel and political church. Yet now, I need to pray the prayers of the ceremony that has begun. And I ask the Good Spirit: please, let my prayers be good and beautiful and let my words and my

songs be true. And let me say the things that need to be said, both in supplication and gratitude in equal measure, so that the spirits of whom I am asking for life, for roots, for Home – may they also feel and know my gratitude for the life that they shepherded me into thirty-two years ago.

* * *

“Ceremony?”

This is the question the old man from Zimbabwe asks me, as I am sitting under the tree in Göttingen.

It’s day five. I plonk away at the mbira, sweating and conscious that people who pass by stare. Spontaneous live music under the trees seems to be just as much a foreigner these days as my own magical self – of course, there are no coincidences. Of course, every prayer is answered before you even ask the question. Of course, the same mbira that makes me other is the one that attracts Tendai, for that is the man’s name. He asks if he can touch the mbira, and after I give my consent, he leans over to stroke the keys with his tough fingers. He laughs in amusement. I think I am being serious, but evidently...

Tendai sits down, rubs his palms together. From his pocket, he fishes out a small pyramid-shaped container, containing some brown powder, and without a word, throws it on the ground.

“There is your prayer!” he says, after muttering some words.

“But a prayer is not a prayer without a story... The Ancestors gave us stories so that we may pray with a full, multi-layered, explanations-thoroughly-unnecessary, style. So, maybe we can begin a story about Ceremony with a wonder story. He moves his hip away from a root jutting out of the ground and settles himself comfortably. I mirror him, preparing to hear his story.

“On the day that my only living Grandmother died,” Tendai tells me, “on that very same day, one of my close relatives was hit by a car and almost died. I was in Harare at the time, and though my grandmother had died here, and I was getting ready to go to my grandmother’s funeral, I received a phone call from some policemen saying that they had found

this cousin of mine on a bicycle, that they had no ID, but that through some miracle they had traced a call that had been made to my phone earlier that day. That is how the Ancestors work – through coincidence–”

...of course, there are no coincidences...

Tendai continues, “So instead of going North, to Poland, to be with the dead, I stayed in place, to be with living family. It pained me, but my Grandmother could hear my songs, from where I was, this I knew.

In this place between life and death, when I didn’t know which one I was – alive, or dead – my father called me on the phone from South Africa. He could not afford a ticket to come and bury his mother, and the pain of that went so deep and so far that we spoke nothing of it.”

I want to say something, to acknowledge this painful detail, yet I don’t want to interrupt the story. Tendai looks at me, as if acknowledging my thought, and then continues.

“The biggest pains go unnamed, I’m sure you know. You seem like a person who has known pain.”

I don’t nod. He pauses for a bit, but continues, “So, my father called me on the phone, and talked not of his dead mother, but instead about the meteorite that fell to Earth in Russia at that time. It was a remarkable occurrence. Yet we were all grieving. We were all in awe. We were all sad. We were all shaken. My father on the phone was saying that he wanted young people to be able to stand in awe of the mystery of something – the mysteries of the Universe – instead of wondering how to earn money and become bankers. I remember the way he spoke, the words he used...”

Awe. Wonder. Spirit. Devotion. Beauty. Magic. Mystery. Grandeur. LIFE.

“In Polish, you would say, ‘*zachwycić się wreszcie*,’” I say to him.

He smiles, “And I remember how true it felt, even if my father himself has trouble being awestruck by life, and comes across as fairly cynical. The lessons I learned from my father, I often had to sneak out the back door, disentangle the gems from the broken-hearted cynicism and cruelty of a man who saw all of the wrong things before he could enjoy anything that might be good.”

A wind had started up in the trees, and a red squirrel paused near us, wondering if we were going to eat. The wind, the tree, the squirrel... so peaceful. I felt a page turn, and the awe Tendai had just spoken of tapped on my shoulder.

“This I learned from my father, then: to chase the things that strike awe into us. Sometimes that takes being very broken, many times – the meteorites that fall onto the earth fall hard. They splinter, shatter both themselves and the things that they hit. Still, they are a gorgeous sweep of fire across the heavens. Still, we open ourselves up to the magic. Life is too short for us to even have time to get tired of it. Such a thing is a spirit-sickness – such a thing is a way that we do not move with our Spirits, and we cannot come with the proper humility and opening of ourselves to Awe, into Ceremony.”

Tendai smiled again. He had been in Poland for a while before coming to Göttingen for his son’s University graduation. He would be going back to Poland in a few weeks, and then back to Zimbabwe, soon. “Too cold for him,” he said. What he didn’t say, or need to: “Too far away from home.”

We sat there for a while, watching the peaceful sun rock to sleep in the arms of a gentle horizon. I thought of Tendai’s story, how beautiful it was, and how terrible too. How death strikes awe into our hearts sometimes, just as much as life does. How complicated life has become, how far from the simplicity of holding a mbira. How we are all ransacked, overwhelmed, and overcome by the spiritual and artistic options of today. We need to – all of us – become marketing professionals, know how to tell other people what they are getting from us. We – all of us, now – are being told to give people what they want. And what do people want? Bread and Circuses, it seems. We can’t know how to ask for magic – it is not in our realm. It is a grace. It is given. In the same vein it seems foolish to go to the Spirits all of the time and ask for what we want, to cry for what we need: rather, it makes more sense to go to the Spirits and say: *strike us with Awe. Strike Awe into our hearts. Shake up our Spirit.*

Then, under a tree, surrounded by busy students walking along the tree-lined pathways, Tendai and I prayed. We pray for real. The cars whizz by on the street. A dove calls in the distance. The sky is small, and now, as the light is dying, gets smaller still. And we hold hands, both foreigners and the only words I can think of, are:

“Please, all of you Big and Beautiful Ones...rid my communication of any unnecessary human words, and add in whatever it is that you know, that needs to be said. Help me connect to this fundamental, wordless humility. Help me feel.”

We end there. The ritual is done. The trees are smiling, the sky a deep, dozing blue, and I am certain where it is that I need to go. I stand up, knowing this:

Conversation with Spirit is a communication. In this sense, Ceremony is not for people alone.

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At some point in my mourning over the loss of depth in the languages of the world – skated over, flattened, squished and squeezed by the imperialistic English tongue – I realised that there is no such thing as a take without give, even in the mixing of languages. The style of the native language will always be mixed in with the new coloniser’s tongue, which is why the English languages of Africa are the ones that move me most, far more than the British which supposedly exemplifies the language by having the most words in it. This is why Zimbabwean English has a depth that American English does not – it is because of the weight of the words, and the weight the words are given stems not from the English language, but from the language of Home, which is Shona or Ndebele, or yet another language. This is why my own English will never be English as English is supposed to be, as it would be if my first language were not Polish. Polish is what gives my English words weight. So perhaps at this point, I approach with deep scepticism anything that I think linguists are saying about being or not being multilingual – what it is or is not. Yes, multiple languages can create confusion in our heads, but the truth is our hearts are never confused, not even with the various tastes of many different words and languages. This is also why language itself does not necessarily have much to do with communica-

tion, but rather with taste, with processing, with living. Words must be earned before they can be given the fortitude of a vocal life.

Still, as the strange immigrants of today, we are in danger of falling between the cracks of languages, cultures, countries, and experiences, until we are at risk of not being understood by anybody at all. This is where I find myself now going to Zimbabwe... a tourist, an illegal immigrant, a whatever, a murungu, a foreigner, a guest – travelling now, flying, to Zimbabwe, pulled to a broken country, and though I don't know it yet – I will have the experience of being broken by it over, and over again, until it seems to me that broken is the only way I can describe myself, my life, my purpose; until the feeling that the only thing I can do now, is be re-born, properly, properly this time –

In a ceremony, with all the people dancing, and singing, and playing the drums. My own rebirth now – it is time for my rebirth!

It is time now.

I feel so terribly, terribly old...

How is it that life is so long and so short at the same time? Too short to lap up all of the goodness, too long to survive the travails of an all-too-sensitive heart.

HARARE, ZIMBABWE

Tendai convinced me to go to Zimbabwe.

His prayer – not mine – did the trick.

His song – not mine – vibrated through me.

My dream – nobody else's – sealed the deal, and here I was, in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe.

I arrive at noon, to a blazing sun which wakes me after multiple flights. Giant billboards emblazoned “HIFA – the Harare International Festival of the Arts” are lit up by it. The colours are so bright, like dancing genies freed from their bottles. I have just spent some months in Peru, learning songs and engaging in plant diets (“sama” n Shipibo, which means “alone” in Polish, and that is exactly what a diet is meant to be – a process of being alone, cut off from the outside, building relationships with plant spirits through song and ceremony), and now I land where my dreams have told me I am meant to be. What awaits me here?

The billboards invite me effectively. I go to the Harare Gardens, in the centre of the city, where the Festival is going on – in May, early winter. There I meet a man who sells *nyunga nyunga*: “shining, glimmering, star” mbira. I like them very much, and, inspired by Chiwoniso Maraire and her songs, I bought one. I ask the man if he knows of any *bira* ceremonies (Ancestor ceremonies) that are happening, as I am there in search of them. Having experienced the sacred plant ceremonies as well as the song ceremonies of my Nez-Perce Teacher, Phil's, homeland, I am hungry for the ceremony. I want to experience, deeply, songs in this sacred context – here, in Zimbabwe.

My mentioning “bira” changes this man's disposition towards me. From an affable tourist, I mutate to somebody who knows something. He relaxes and talks more, and it is then, that he tells me this very interesting thing: “If our young people knew the power of the instrument you have in your hands, then they would be walking around and playing mbiras

instead of playing with their cell phones. They would be carrying mbiras in their bags, and using their thumbs and fingers to play them on the transport and in the cities, instead of typing all of the time into their machines.”

I have thought of this audacious phrase many times since then, watching our world devolve into screen after screen, our eyes going numb with the artificial light of the entertainment Frankensteins that we have created.

I arrive in Zimbabwe with six instruments: my djembe, my mbira, my violin, my karimba, my flutes, and a rattle. The mbira, the spiritual legacy of Zimbabwe, was one big part of my being here. I wanted to learn to play “properly” as they say. Thus far, I learned songs from the man who sold me my karimba, from YouTube, and I also improvised and composed my songs in ceremony, as they came. Though I learned traditional songs, and their power, my songs came too, full force, often wordless – sometimes simply a tangling of sound that didn’t fit into any category. The songs that came were simple, often focused on one word, one truth, one idea, one longing of my heart, and sometimes one story. That’s how I learned to play. All attempts, earlier and later, to fit myself into a mould failed.

I learned within traditions, and then promptly turned everything I learned around and did it my own way. At some point, I justified this through the explanation that I was a woman, and my teachers were mostly men, in some cases deeply embedded in patriarchal traditions. But there’s another, less gendered, and more comfortable explanation, which is that all traditional healers are different: each traditional healer has their way. We can learn, we can borrow, we can use, we can enter into cultural paradigms, but ultimately, each healer has their way, their spirits, their Ancestors, their guardians, their walk. In a traditional context, this is well understood: a healer is not meant to be a copy of another person. A healer is meant to be original. A healer is meant to receive guidance from the Spirit.

Healers – whether they be shamans, masvikiro or ng’anga singers or both – are a gift to their community, not because they fit in, but because their ears are poised to hear the sounds that come from the outside. So the mix and match of who we may never look one and the same, and the old people in the village know that when a person behaves a certain way, it is the essence, or the impulse behind the behaviour that must be first understood and supported, rather than the whole behaviour being trashed, shamed, and chastised.

As the Wise Elder Pathisa Nyathi says repeatedly: “The spiritual principles governing all of the traditions are the same. The same, the same, the same.”

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Some weeks later, I am invited to an Ancestor Ceremony. There, amid the mbira playing, drums, dancing, traditional beer and general enthusiasm, I am confronted by an ancestral spirit.

“There is something different about you”, the Svikiro tells me. “Your Ancestors never did violence to my Ancestors.”

He seems surprised. He didn’t know you could be a white person without carrying on your back dead coloniser-relatives, but from the perspective of African Tradition, this is extremely important. When we meet, what my Ancestors did or did not do matters, it weaves into the fabric of our interaction. The Ngozi, the hungry ghosts, must be fed – but they must be fed honestly.

That the Slavs have an Ancestral tradition very close to the Shona, and that we did not colonise each other – this seems to enable us to tap into a deep river of connection that goes beyond immediate, surface level assumptions and instead is the voice of Spirit in our Lives.

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TWO YEARS LATER... HARARE, ZIMBABWE

It all seems game-like, somehow, at this moment, years later, after I have gone to Zimbabwe, been minced through the meat-grinder of several initiations. “It was a gamble,” people say. “Why Zimbabwe?” they ask. They don’t understand a road that is a series of signs, but I know the signs came from my Polish Ancestors, came stamped with approval

by those wild-haired, singing, Slavic ones. Though they were not the only Ancestors involved, of course. One does not go to Zimbabwe on the whim of Polish Ancestors. The African Ancestors have to be very involved – instrumental. The result is that I – like many others in this world – have staked my life on a dream, and still I am watching the result of that gamble. It didn't feel like it was my gamble. It felt fairly choiceless, yet here I am, no longer caught up in the nightmare of my own life. Here I am, friend to my Spirits now. Here I am, proof that miracles do happen – healthy, whole, healed, and a proper ceremonialist at that.

The Truth is that in my few years on this earth, I have barely learned how to pray.

Here is a Truth hidden in the corner of all of our eyes: if you listen carefully you can hear the thoughts of the trees –with great care, you can hear what is behind the thoughts of the people and you can see them, as if for the first time. And when you hear the thoughts behind the thoughts, you can hear the nature of the thing behind the thoughts, the song that is there, that wraps them up – you can see if you hear the song. Everything in life is in service to the Road, and if you listen carefully, you can hear the thoughts of the Road, and if you listen very, very carefully, you can hear the nature of the thing behind the thoughts of the Road.

And what, pray, is the mystical nature of love? Tell me the Truth, please, even if it is a difficult one. I often feel like an old woman now, and I would rather – much rather – hear something true, than something impressive.

Yet now, looking back on these years of initiation, something inside of me has grown proud of the route that I chose to take – even if most of the time I felt I had no choice at all. Looking back, it feels like I spent most of my time somehow under trees, in the mountains – hidden in plain sight, playing the karimba, the mbira, the violin. Now, when I turn my face back to the community I feel must be there, it is my few stories and songs that I have to offer and to give. I have the violin. It is the only thing that can speak for me and not in technique, no, not at all in technique. Violin playing is not a skill, this thing I have relearned. Violin playing is a lesson in listening for the true voice of all creatures. Violin playing is a sacred ceremony.

Let's begin again, this time with another story. Even disconnected and jumbled thoughts of the likes of my own need a story, after all. I was fasting in a cave in Domboshawa, Zimbabwe. One of those caves in which the bushmen – the San people – left their paintings. I knew very little then about the caves, but I had just emerged from a bout of painful, excruciating, physical fire from my walk with the Ancestors and I owed them an apology. My gut told me that the best way to apologise is to listen carefully, and the best way I have learned to listen is to go into nature and fast. So there I was, fasting, confused about what it was that had happened – pregnancy, being struck down by the fire of the Ancestors, a miscarriage, and their anger on my skin.

This is the thing to understand about us Ceremonialists – we do not make enlightened decisions, no. We follow the veiled language of the Wild Spirited Spirit Ones. We are in constant translation, attentive to the language of the Spirit in our lives. We go where we are called. It is not a bad thing. It is not a choice, either, not a human one. The choice involved is the choice to adhere to our natures. This is why I find the language of “choice” that is currently used in the over-culture of Western society to be deeply flawed: to choose to adhere to my nature and to choose to follow the voice of my Spirit are the only choices available. They have been the most difficult, and of them, I am the proudest. The problem is that in the thinking of Civilisation, we are not given the option to choose to act according to our nature; we are given a set of choices and a set of possible and predictable consequences to those choices, and thus we are trapped within a set of paradigms that thinks about life a certain way, only one way. This is not the way the Big Ones living in the Trees ask us to know ourselves. Thus choice is a tricky, tricky concept. At least it has been for me.

In this case, I chose to go to Domboshawa, outside of Harare, Zimbabwe. But even this choice, please understand, was accommodated for me. When you choose to go into the Wild, into Nature, to the Mountain, to fast, that choice automatically comes by way of invitation by the Spirits who live there. So we must both choose and in that magic and mystery that is the open road of the Spirit, we choose to go at the same time as they choose to call us. My choice becomes theirs – they are that generous, Those Beautiful Ones for which human language has no tether to give them a worthy enough home.

I found myself in the cave in Domboshawa. By day, I hid as best as I could, so that the few people who came by would not find me there. Still, one of those days a group of schoolchildren came with a guide. I was sitting behind a tree at the edge of the cave, and I caught what the Guide was saying: “the people who drew the paintings on the walls of the cave were *svikiros* or *mashamanas* – (*mashamans would be the Shona-fied way of saying many shamans, or shaman plural*). They would go into trance and they would paint the pictures you see here.” The children and the guide left. Shortly afterwards, I found a painted bead in the dirt behind the tree, left there as if for me. (*The language of Spirit is ever personal, and fasting in the Wilderness is a place where that deeply metaphorical language hits us most directly – there are no coincidences, and especially not when you are fasting under a tree. It is a way of sharpening our ears, and listening closely.*)

Here was my feeling, and I did not at all know this when I first arrived in Zimbabwe: mediumship of the kind that the Shona know so well is why I was called there. A deeper spiritual calling wanted to be told through me, through my body, through my voice, through my perception. Some Spirit called me home to a country perennially rocked by instability, a country where revolution, inflation, fuel and food shortages were quite normal – to a place where family is the central organising principle of life, and where I had none. Yet there it was, on the ground, a bead – indicating to me that wearing beads, meaning healing work, was why I was here. My human mind did as many things as it could to the information to distort it – because it’s never really how we think it will go – but in the end, initiation on all levels is what I went through to find my true nature, as a ceremonialist. It’s the best I can come up with, in terms of words. Yes, I can call myself a Shaman. Yes, that would be true. Yes, I could call myself a *svikiro*. Yes, on some level that would be true. Yes, I could call myself a spiritualist, and yes, that would also be true. But Ceremonialist feels best – it is direct, specific, and gives a hint as to the nature of my particular gift. There is no one way to shamanise, no one way to initiate, no one way to talk to God or to Ancestor or to the little people in Nature. But when you have been gripped very hard by the hand of Goddess and finally found your tongue like a lost snake, and when you catch the eye of those Beautiful Big Ones, then you feel in your-

self that swell of knowledge – *this is what I am here to do*. And then you want to say something. I certainly do. Then you might finally even have something to say. Or to sing, even. Or maybe they can be the same thing – the song, the story, the word, and the voice. After all, the alchemy of all of them together creates the magic.

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HARARE AVENUES

The flu should have been expected, but it wasn't. I thought malaria was more reasonable, but no – Harare is not full of malaria, it is full of the winter flu, and even I – with thick Polish skin – was not immune.

In fact, as one of my teachers told me, shamans are more likely to fall ill. And they can't heal themselves. "Ng'anga hazvirapi", goes the Shona proverb. A shaman – a spiritualist – or a healer – cannot heal themselves.

So, here's the truth about shamans that I learned while I lay in bed, living in a room in the Avenues in Harare, not able to stand up without falling (this was a first): Shamans get sick, a lot because they are constantly healing themselves, and the world. Their symptoms mean something. But they won't tell you about it. Not necessarily.

My dreams then were full of mermaids, and water, and men with knives, and big lions, and some dreams had me so terrified wanting to wake up, and sleep forever – hallucinating, now, and seeing men with knives come out of the walls and try to stab me. This, I learned, was normal. "The fear has to be shaken out of you, sweated out of you," said one of my teachers later, in his own 'dare', a round hut, surrounded by herbs, sacred cloths, shells, stones, bones, and sacred walking sticks (tsvimbo). He gave me herbs and had me sweat more, under a plastic cover.

"You need to sweat with the spirits of the plants."

My grandmother used to say the same thing. "Sweat it

out!” Whenever the fever came haunting. She would pile blankets on my bed and say, “Sweat it out.”

Now here I was, sweating it – sweating everything out, wringing myself out, being wrung out – in Southern Africa, far away from where my grandmother had her sweats.

The fear was illuminating.

“The fear is the first thing that needs to go, and this is the hardest thing,” that is what my teacher said. “The fear is the thing that keeps you from seeing, hearing, intuiting properly. This world is not at all what it seems, and all of us would know this if we were able to open our eyes... and we would be able to open our eyes if we could wake up from the FEAR.”

Twisting between sheets, soaked in sweat and tears, I was waking up from fear.

Fear is the hardest thing to overcome after trauma. Trauma severs pieces of you, and then you are deafened, blinded. In so many ways our civilization is simply traumatised – we don’t want to see what truly is. We cut down trees, our allies, our friends. We raze through the Earth with machines, killing. We pretend the dead have nothing to do with us. We think dreams are not real. We call ghosts psychology and try to wave it away with a DSM wand. I don’t want to see anymore, hear anymore, and therefore I don’t want to speak anymore either. Trauma confuses us so that we no longer know what is true, and what is a lie. Trauma cuts off parts of ourselves: our humanity, our intuition, our imagination – and then we hide our heads in the sand, hoping we choke and move on to better things. To be truly brave becomes more and more difficult, not easier. Life is more fragile. Plenty is at stake. The fragility of our existence is increasingly terrifying.

I wake up again, drenched.

“It is an evil spirit. It will go away,” says my teacher, smiling. Nothing moves him. Nothing worries him. He is a shaman, through and through.

The thing to remember about traditional cultures is that they are extremely pragmatic. People there live difficult lives and do not

engage whole-heartedly in things that do not work, have no effect. To the logic of traditional, earth-based cultures, it is us who are insane, because we are the ones who are obsessed with the idea of “faith in God”. Faith. “Faith in God”, as opposed to “living in faith”, meaning more closely “living in trust”, is an abstract ideal, and it makes no sense. It has no connection with the material world, applying our obsessions with division and separation, “giving to God what belongs to God and giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar” – rather than weaving spirituality into our lives. See, even that statement is absurd. This idea is that it is we who choose to weave spirituality into our lives, as though it is a choice, as though life itself is not already a gift from spirit, already flowing joyfully through everything.

One of the things that healers learn early on, is that every healing is a transformation, a grace, a creative act. So healing anything takes a new, creative method, which will be different from what happened last time. Every practitioner and participant of the ceremony knows this – that every ceremony is completely different from the one that came before and the one that will come after, even if the protocols, style, tradition, substance, participants and even intention of the ceremony are the same. And because of this, often, approaching a problem that seems to behave in the same way, with solutions that worked before makes no sense to the traditional healer. It’s like the proverbial insanity of repeating the same thing over and over again. The rule, in my experience, seems to be – if it worked once before, it will not work again. Granted, I broke my neck on this rule many times – I banged my head against the wall again and again, feeling safe with certain methods, wanting the same results, approaching repeating problems with a clinical objective distance. This is not the way that healing works. It is always a challenge, it is always fresh, it is always a new problem, requiring a new solution – because we are the ones who need to learn something new, something that we did not know before.

In this sense, traditional healing is a process of real learning – learning to be constantly curious, constantly scientific in process. A mystical scientific process of learning, where every time we begin: “I do not know, I do not know, I do not know”. And the prayer, which focuses on the request, opens the vessel for love saying: please, show me. Please, be with me. Please, help me.

We are now, all of us; indigenous traditions, and Western people alike, in a new scenario. The division will no longer help any of us. Putting certain ideas, or people, or cultures on pedestals will not help us. We are facing unprecedented problems. All of us praying for fresh, creative solutions, which will come from a grand merging of the problems and the people who carry them. We are all in this together.

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Having survived that dreadful winter, months later, my sister asked me for a clear prayer ritual. Something simple, a basic formula which can help grow her practice. How shy we are, in conversation with Spirit. How lofty. How much we seek the right words, the right way. We know that in prayer we are seen, and yet we don't know how to be seen. How do we come into intimacy with spirit? Where to begin? We begin in prayer. With that settling of the space, the opening of the sacred place, with a gift. We give gratitude. Then we ask for understanding. We give thanks again. Then we listen. Opening our eyes, our ears, our hearts. "Let me see you. Let me feel you. Be with me, in all things. Hold my hand, hold my heart. Do the same for those who hate me, so they no longer feel the need to hate. Heal the souls of those who have wronged me, so they no longer need to wrong anybody else. You are loved. Hold me in the love that you are. Thank you. See you tomorrow. See you today. See you as I walk away from here. You are my love. I am your love."

"Wow. Truly, in Zimbabwe, you have learned how to pray," my sister tells me.

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The drums, the dancing and the people. The Ceremony is glorious! Spirit comes, speaks Truth, and Truth is received. My feet dance relief into the earth, because I know, finally, why I am here – my purpose is no longer evasive.

A professor of Anthropology in Poland once said something that made my experience make a little more sense – "Shamans are born with a gift. They are at home in the Spirit world. And when they go there, whether the Spirits are annoyed with them or whether they are hav-

ing a good time together, what is important is that the shaman is at home there – the Spirits cannot banish the Shaman. They can do that to other people, but not to the shaman. This is the gift that the shaman is born with. It is not a technique.’

As the African stars look down upon me, I know shamans are born, not made. Gifted by spirits, not by people. The fire splits into a bright grin, sending sparks into the air and lighting up the faces of the laughing, singing, dancing people. However, these same Shamans are accepted by people – they must be, in this lifetime, for bridge-building to make sense.

I think this goes a long way to explain the experience of a lot of people on earth these days, as more and more shamans are waking up and being born to compensate for all of the ones that our society either kills, like the colonising cultures did to indigenous traditions or the burnings of witches in Europe or the hunting down and killing of shamans by the Soviet State; that, or they are put away into hospitals and called mad – their visions and callings twisted into the diagnosis of a mental illness.

Shamanism is not a technique. Nobody can teach it to you. But it is a real and necessary thing. A true vocation.

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In the end, this is what my teacher said to me:

“Your Ancestors gave me one message for you – after what we do here, you are done, you must not go to any healers anymore, now you must talk to your spirits directly, most of your communication must be with them. You must trust your spirits. Because they are directing your work, it is not your choice – you must come to them with everything, ask them, give yourself time also with every decision. They must tell you now, what to do, where to go. People like you – people who do rituals and ceremonies – do not have stable places to live. Like Chaminuka, Ambuya Nehanda, they travelled from community to community performing whatever ritual was necessary – not more, not less. Your life partner must understand that, if you get a life partner – if he understands it, it will be good. Understanding is a grace that is given – your parents also, their eyes are closed to your work, but it is not their fault. Their eyes will be opened by the Ancestors. This will happen later. The road of Spirit and the Peacemaker is not easy. You are a messenger

of Spirit, an elder – it is good that you are here. Sent by Spirit. Pray to them for everything. When you are born a Svikiro, you can't run away from that. Can you run away from your shadow? It is always following you – for your good. The Ancestors are messengers from the Creator, they are who we talk to. That being said, the Spirit is mysterious. These days people think you just need to buy some clothes, a walking stick and some bute and you are done, but it is not like that. Spirit does not live in cloth. My body is their cloth. They live in the body. Everything must be done with the right heart, with the right intention, and we are human and you do not know what lives in a healer's heart. And we all make mistakes and now I can write a new story without mistakes – your story, the story of your life is also a healing story. ... What else? Travel with medicine, ALWAYS. Tomorrow we start the work. Pray for your enemies, give them gifts, then walk away. We are not sent here to love only nice people or people who like us. Flying is a way of travelling, it is not evil. Neither is having children. Spirit is now knocking on everybody's doors and they must respond now. Not when they have time or later, but now. And we must understand that the language of Spirit also lives in paradox – and mystery. And it is love, it is all love, and we are here to love each other and the Earth also. The Earth needs healing. We need elders to initiate properly. We are given different gifts, we can't all be the same – we are all different, with different gifts.

Take everything to the Ancestors. Everything. They will talk to you.

At night, I see myself, the baby that I was, in a box. The plane takes me high, high, into the night sky. The box becomes a basket. The plane melts away, and the basket flows, floats, along a river of stars. And there they are, those smiling faces of lions, mermaids, people, grandfathers and grandmothers. I am home.

SHILIKA CHISOKO

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SHILIKA CHISOKO

*UNDOING THE
KNOTS OF PLACE
AND SPACE:*

AN EXPLORATION OF THE
POSSIBILITIES RENDERED BY
VIOLENT DECEPTIONS
IN SELECTED
CONTEMPORARY ZAMBIAN
SHORT FICTION

Historically, Zambia has had a shortage of literary production and criticism. Literary scholar Ranka Primorac has attributed this phenomenon to what she terms “a literariness of crisis”, suggesting that from the country’s inception, “Zambia’s written literary cultures have evolved in various conditions of crisis” (498). This led to Zambia developing a literary tradition that deviated from most of the African canon. Additionally, Leonard Chirwa posits that the Zambian “book publishing industry is also adversely affected by exorbitant printing costs which inevitably means that the books produced are too highly-priced for the average Zambian” (3). Despite these setbacks, there has been an increase in the production of fiction in recent years and I link this to the ease of publishing that digital media affords Zambian writers.¹ In addition to this, there has also been an increase in the participation of women writers and a tendency to portray the lives of women in a specific manner. With the above-mentioned consider-

¹ Adenekan and Cousins have written comprehensively about the possibilities that the online writing

space affords contemporary writers in Adenekan, Shola, and Helen Cousins. *African short stories and the online writing space. The Postcolonial Short Story: Contemporary Essays*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013. 19 Adenekan, Shola, and Helen Cousins. *African short stories and the online writing space. The Postcolonial Short Story: Contemporary Essays*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013. 199–213.9–213.

ations in mind, the following article concerns a common characteristic amongst a necessarily curated selection of contemporary female-authored Zambian short stories: “violent interruptions” that threaten the lives of the women represented in said fiction. The stories are *A Hand to Hold* (2018) by Mali Kambandu, *All to Love* (2019) by Lydia Ngoma and *Thandiwe* (2022) by Mubanga Kalimamukwento. To support this observation, I borrow from Mbembe and Roitman’s assertion that the inhabitants of the post-colony develop “regimes of subjectivity” to grapple with

the effects of living in constant fear of sudden violence. Materialising from this finding will be the argument that these violent outbursts denote a society distinctively marked by violence at its core. I argue that this foundational violence is structural, using the work of scholars such as Slavoj Žižek and others who aptly hypothesise the tenacity of said violence. Aside from unearthing a new terrain for contemporary authors, digital media provides new possibilities for contemporary literary critics such as myself. I can metaphorically reach into academic repositories from across the globe and access an array of scholarship. The work of Žižek and Primorac, two Eastern European scholars form the basis through which I carry out my analysis speaks to the capabilities of digital media. Furthermore, I find it intriguing that my work marries theories from Africa and Eastern Europe, two regions that have long been obscure due to legacies of violence and subjugation. In this way, I view digital media as possessing a “deconfining” capacity – allowing individuals to untie the conceptual knots of place and space. This promotes cross-cultural exchange, the presentation of previously obscure narratives and the establishment of one’s place in the world.

Additionally, in this article, I draw attention to *what* constitutes a violent interruption in the selected short fiction. I will compare

*The Heart of a Woman*² and the selected short stories to highlight a progression in thematic concerns within Zambian short stories authored by women. Thereon I will contend that this shift

(with attention to the occurrences described as violent) can be accred-

² The reference is quoted as written by the authors.

ited to the mode through which the selected short fiction is disseminated – digital media platforms. This article will also explore the affordances of the short story form and platform through which the stories are published. Finally, I will explore the successive influence of the representations of women in the selected fiction in possibly swaying public perceptions about an array of societal issues. Taking my cue from Maria Pia Lara's work on feminist narratives in the public sphere, I will argue that by simply presenting women's issues as fiction, these contemporary stories demand recognition for these issues and have the capacity to act as "illocutionary forces." Finally, I contend that the short stories are not merely counter-narratives but serve as vehicles to portray the "slippery" nature of navigating Zambian life as a woman.

As I gathered the resources that would constitute the theoretical framework of this article, I made the unwitting decision to make use of the work of Žižek and Primorac. The former because of a recommendation that was made to me, and the latter because her work is the most accessible critical commentary on Zambian literature. Reflecting on the theme of this volume, I view my unintentional inclusion of Žižek and Primorac as indicative of the ways in which cross-cultural exchange is occurring between Southern Africa and Eastern Europe. Although I cannot claim that this exchange is widespread, the organic nature in which I encountered these scholars and the way their scholarship comfortably 'fits' my argument points towards more similarities than differences between Southern Africa and Eastern Europe. Thus, I begin my analysis with the view that it also serves as an exploration of how texts from Southern Africa and Eastern Europe can be read alongside one another.

The utterance of the word 'violence' conjures up the imagery of physical assault by one or several individuals onto another (or others). Judith Butler observes that "the figure of the blow has tacitly organised some of the major debates on violence, suggesting that violence is something that happens between two parties in a heated encounter" (2). Notwithstanding, Butler acknowledges the restrictive nature of this categorisation, citing how violence ubiquitously undergirds the structure of contemporary society. She argues that "without disputing the violence of the physical blow, we can nevertheless insist that social structures or systems, including systemic racism, are violent" (2). In a similar vein, Slavoj Žižek

warns against the temptation to define violence as being wholly objective. He stresses that it is imperative “to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts. A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and promote tolerance” (1). Žižek’s use of the word “outbursts” is of particular importance, as it signals the existence of a pre-existing framework of violence that renders these outbursts possible.

“Violent interruptions” is a term used by Ranka Primorac to describe the varying iterations of a host of arduous “issues related to post-colonial modernity (such as HIV/AIDS, homoeroticism, mental illness and witchcraft)” rendered in a collection of

} Quoted as written by the authors.

Zambian short fictions titled *The heart of a woman*³, and their capacity to instigate instances of chaos in the characters’ daily lives (22). They

occur at various points throughout the selected short fiction. For example, “I can call her whatever the fuck I want,” says an incensed Misozi in response to her sister scrutinising her (Kalimamukwento 9). This rude reaction is not merely a result of Misozi’s annoyance at travelling from America to Zambia to care for her sickly mother. Rather, it points towards Misozi’s deep-seated resentment of her mother and the complexity of their relationship. *Thandiwe* by Mubanga Kalimamukwento is a story that details the return to Zambia from the diaspora by a woman called Misozi to care for her ailing mother. The narrative has various thematic concerns, ranging from transnational subjectivity to “black tax”. However, of cardinal interest to this article is the bearing through which these instances occur. At the behest of her sister, Misozi is forced to return home. This return is two-fold: physical, in the sense that she must leave her home in the diaspora for Zambia, and mental, in that she is compelled to revisit the trauma she experienced during her childhood. To her displeasure, Misozi must put her life in the USA on hold because of her ailing mother, forcing her to deal with her dilemma immediately.

In a form akin to that of Misozi, Kunda is reminded of the tumultuous nature of her relationship with her mother in *A Hand to Hold*. The focal points of Mali Kambandu’s 2018 tale are a meeting concerning Kunda’s wedding preparations and the preceding and ensuing events. Here, the structure of the story lends itself to amplifying the instances that ‘inter-

rupt' Kunda's state of being. The narrative begins with a distinctively detailed description of a scene in Lusaka's Ngombe compound, which narrows down to a mysterious frail and seemingly ailing figure resting in a bed. Just as the woman's figure begins to take shape, she is quickly abandoned, and the narrative shifts to Kunda driving through a compound. Again the scene shifts, and Kunda is transported to her mother's living room. Surrounded by various women, Kunda "looks around the table and can barely remember a happy moment with these women who are helping her mother plan the happiest moments in her life" (Kambandu 5). Later revelations in the story unveil that Kunda has a distant relationship with her mother and is instead closer to her former house help, Reeda Mwale. From Kunda's interactions with both parties, it is evident that she is uncomfortable around the former and prefers the latter's company. However, Maggie tells Kunda that she should not associate with the woman who brings her comfort due to a lack of familial bond. This comprehension forces Kunda to confront the negative feelings festering inside her and arguably constitutes a violent interruption.

All to Love by Lydia Ngoma is presented from the perspective of three characters: the sisters Enala and Judy together with Judy's daughter, Chola. Their sections offer responses to Enala's arrival at Judy's house in Lusaka from a town in Zambia called Chinsali. Enala is visibly unwell, having travelled to Lusaka to seek medical treatment. A discussion between the two sisters reveals that Enala is HIV positive, and other aspects of the story confirm that Enala's husband, Onesmus, is abusive towards her. However, her husband travels to Lusaka to collect her, threatening her with divorce if she stays away from their home longer. Onesmus tells Enala, "I'm not forcing you to return...just don't be surprised when you're replaced" (Ngoma 12). Enala's sudden arrival and the domino effects constitute violent interruptions, propelling each character to confront her circumstances.

Primorac observes that *The heart of a woman* constructs the notion of "cityness" associated with a mode of subjectivity that allows characters to circumvent or overcome these, viz, a "disposition" rather than a fixed identity or an impartial aspect of space. Indeed, the same can be said of the selected short fiction. The characters in these narratives exist in a myriad of locales (rural Zambia, Lusaka, the USA, etc.). Nevertheless, their capacity to overcome their respective hurdles alludes to a state of mind – instead of spatial-cultural resolutions. For example, Enala decides to return to

her husband and family, saying she “was going to give it all to love” (Ngoma 14). She neglects her need for proper medical care and instead performs her predetermined societal role. In each of the short stories, the characters steel themselves for the challenges that lie ahead. Misozi refuses to engage with the possibilities arising from the information she extracts from a shaky conversation with her mother, as illustrated when she says, “me? I say, fuck empathy; I lift my purse and walk out into the waiting sunlight” (Kalimamukwento 24). Emerging from the adaptive quality exhibited by the characters is the allusion towards a society wrought with violence, which constantly threatens the upheaval of the character’s state of being.

In her analysis of *The Heart of a Woman*, Primorac links the compounded disposition adopted by the characters in the various fictions to Mbembe and Roitman’s conceptualisation of “regimes of subjectivity” – that is, the ensemble of experiences and mentality shared by individuals residing in the post-colony. Quoting Mbembe and Roitman, Primorac observes that “regimes of subjectivity and self-making imposed on those who are required to interweave their existence with the conditions of instability, uncertainty and discontinuity which recur in many post-colonial contexts” (25). She further notes that the ever-looming threat of instantaneous interruptions of the individual’s everyday life within the post-colony lends itself to the production of fragmented identities, with these identities affording people the capacity to develop an inventory of improvisations to cope with the threat of sudden changes. While I find that Mbembe and Roitman’s theorisation is of great importance in understanding the persistence of structural violence in the selected short fiction within the Zambian cultural context, I forgo a focus on the post-colony as a concept and instead build upon the idea of the continuation of legacies of violence in Zambian society. I do this in alignment with the critiques of writers such as Helon Habila, who argue for a shift away from what he terms “post-nationalist” writing in contemporary African literature. The diverse characters in the selected short fiction display characteristics of having developed “regimes of subjectivity”. Misozi and Kunda have strained relationships with their mothers, with the latter parties depicted as cold, distant, and uncaring.

However, the narratives unfold and divulge information that adds nuance to their distant behaviour. Kunda’s mother, Maggie, de-

votes her time to her work to provide for her child. For Maggie, making money and achieving success was necessary because “it was what she did to keep her child clothed and fed” (Kambandu 10). Similarly, a suggestion is made by Thandiwe whilst she is in frenzied conversation with Misozi, that she may have been sexually assaulted by her father, and further that Misozi may have been conceived as a result. “He will hurt her also,” Thandiwe says, referring to her father, Gabriel (Kalimamukwento 21). While these revelations do not serve to rid Thandiwe and Maggie of fault regarding the trauma their daughters have experienced, the occurrences imply the existence of structures that limit their capacity to traverse society with the privileges that men have. Their shortcomings in their relationships with their daughters seem to hold more profound consequences because they are women. This argument is qualified not by what is mentioned but rather by *what is excluded*. Misozi’s father is only briefly mentioned in *Thandiwe*, while Kunda’s father is not mentioned at all in “A Hand to Hold.” However, Misozi and Kunda direct their resentment towards their mothers. From this, it is suggested that both narratives operate in a society that holds women to a higher standard than men, a society that does not allow women to make mistakes. I argue that this discrepancy connotes the existence of structural violence.

Žižek’s argument is suggestive of the notion that the structure of society *is* inherently violent. As mentioned above, violent interruptions consistently featured in the selected short stories threaten to destabilise the very being of the women represented. I argue that these violent interruptions should be regarded as acts of violence, albeit in different forms. It is precisely this variety of form, which is yet feasibly similar in their impact on the personhood of the women represented in the short stories, together with the women’s capacity to manoeuvre the challenges they are facing with a somewhat fixed disposition, that alludes towards the understanding that the system through which they operate is inherently violent. This understanding is overwhelmingly presented by the authors as subconscious, which amplifies the latent nature of violence as a determining feature in the framework of society, whether the authors intended to or not. For instance, Onesimus is physically and mentally abusive towards Enala. She returns to him however when he threatens to replace her. For her, the threat of being unmarried outweighs her need for well-being. The

implication of her decision is grave because it suggests a society in which a woman's marital status matters more than her health. Despite being pushed through a window by Onesmus early on in her marriage, when meeting to discuss the situation, their families "had a hushed discussion and at the end of it all, Enala was leaving in Onesmus' pickup truck" (Ngoma 9). This illustrates how various parties act in concert to maintain the position of women in society, with no regard for the health and safety of women.

Beyond conveying the underlying violent nature of the societies in which their characters are placed, there is a difference in the depictions of violence and the methods the characters in *The Heart of a Woman* and the selected short fiction adopt to evade these predicaments – a contradiction that is arguably connected to the variance in conditions of production between the two collections. While *The Heart of a Woman* was published in print in 1997 with a panoptic theme of women's empowerment (Primorac 25), the selected short fiction has been published online from 2018 onwards (without a mandated narrative focus like that of the stories *The Heart of a Woman*). Despite a clear directional focus influencing their production, the female characters in the selected short stories are depicted experiencing various forms of violence. However, where the characters in *The Heart of a Woman* adopt methods and mannerisms through which they can survive in their violent societies, the women in the selected short fiction hardly find an efficient resolution to their predicaments, and often by the end of the stories, they return to the point from which their troubles began. For Misozi, Kunda and Enala, there is no happy ending, only an acknowledgement of the precarious nature of their positionality and an attempt to adapt to it.

I argue that the ability to portray a lack of favourable resolutions stems from the affordances of digital media. Digital media grants authors the possibility to escape the bureaucracy of print media and circumvent subordination to didactic, journalistic, and various utilitarian discourses that have primarily been characteristics of Zambian literature (Primorac 20). In terms of literary production, Zambia has largely been excluded from developing at a similar pace to the rest of the continent. Whilst many African writers capitalised from the influential *Heinemann African Writers Series*, the few Zambian writers that have been published since independence have been captivated by what Primorac terms a "liter-

ariness of crisis". She contends that "a local literary system that has emerged from conditions of economic, social or political instability and threat, in which producers and consumers of literature allow for the possibility that texts may be directed towards instrumentalist as well as aesthetic ends and purposes" (576). The state control of publishing houses during early post-independence days and their later preference for educational material over fictional titles (for financial reasons) led to a stunted development of Zambian literature. Literature that does not serve a progressive or instructive purpose has largely been deemed unnecessary. It is therefore significant that the selected short stories do not expressly fixate on didactic concerns, a divergence from Zambian literary tradition that is made possible by the autonomy that digital media provides contemporary writers. Commenting on a Zambian literary journal from the early independence days called *New Writing from Zambia*, Primorac writes "While female authors were not absent, and the group did address woman-centred topics (among others) ... they were the minority, and among them, there was a conspicuous absence of black women" (60). From this, I argue that digital media has facilitated the increased participation of women in the Zambian literary arena. The fact that the increased participation of female authors has led to depictions of violent interruptions, such as the ones in the selected short stories, points to the possible (and perhaps deliberate) obscuring of women's narratives that did not align with dominant patriarchal interests.

Each of the selected pieces of short fiction has chiefly been published online, with "A Hand to Hold" winning the inaugural *Kalemba Short Story Prize*, "All to Love" being shortlisted for the same prize in 2019 and *Thandiwe* being shortlisted for the 2022 *Commonwealth Short Story Prize*. While digital media allows the contemporary writer to reach new audiences and abandon spatial-cultural obligations, Stephanie Santana Bosch presupposes that "collapsing cyberspace into a homogeneous diasporic space returns us to problematic assumptions of cyberspace as placeless" (190). She observes that this conception fails to encapsulate network formations between people belonging to diverse distinctive communities at national and transnational levels. Network formation is exhibited in the selected short fiction and is evidenced by their rejection of strict spatial-cultural ties whilst simultaneously writing within Zambian cultural contexts. The authors illustrate this by using Zambian languages in texts

without offering English translations. Despite reaching audiences outside of Zambia, especially evidenced in the case of *Thandiwe* the stories maintain the topography of Zambian society and write into Zambian cultural contexts. This points towards the creation of new networks of communication.

Paired with the predisposition of short story form towards depicting various forms of dislocation as characters undergo various changes, I argue that the form and platform through which the selected short fiction is circulated can influence public discourse concerning the issues they bring to the fore. To support this claim, I lean into Maria Pia Lara's assertion that women's narratives can be emancipatory. She writes that viewing language and reason as communicative and differentiated spheres of validity "leads to an understanding of how, with the subjects of the speech-acts focusing on newly problematic social issues, it is possible to transform them by creating new narratives in the public sphere" (2). While an attempt to definitively quantify the social impact of the selected short fiction would be far-fetched, I contend that exploring this impact is nonetheless essential – because it allows one to glimpse at otherwise obscure narratives within the Zambian cultural context. Pia Lara contends that "the channels by which new forms of solidarities are fuelled rely on the capacity of narratives to disclose previously unseen marginalisation, exclusion and prejudice" (8). Patriarchal inclinations have long characterised Zambian society. Work by Karen Tranberg Hansen supports this notion, detailing how women in Zambia have consistently been viewed "as mothers and wives whose sexuality was to be controlled within the conjugal unit" (231). Therefore, the importance of the depictions of violence in the selected short fiction cannot be understated. This is because they offer alternative perspectives from which to view the position of women in Zambian society and illuminate the dangers this can entail.

By way of conclusion, I offer a quote from Žižek in which he comments on the French suburban riots of 2005. He writes that "what is more difficult to accept is precisely the riots' meaninglessness: more than a form of protest, they are what Lacan called a *passage à l'acte* – an impulsive movement into action which can't be translated into speech and carries with it an intolerable weight of frustration" (76). Extracting from this context, I put forward the view that the violence represented in the selected short is also meaningless. It is not a means to an end but rather a

result of a system that continues to propagate the subjugation of women. From my analysis of the stories as resisting the urge to portray the women as victors of struggle or teach some 'valuable' lesson, I argue for the progression of Zambian literary criticism away from a focus on categorising Zambian literature as being enveloped by didacticism and nationalist agendas. This is not to say that Zambian literary texts are devoid of these elements. However, I propose that the way digital media offers Zambia women writers new publication possibilities also warrants critical literary attention. The affordances of digital media have given way to the increased participation of women in the Zambian literary scene and via that to the production of narratives, such as that which is portrayed in the selected short fiction. The prospects presented by these shifts are boundless, with the possibility of being "emancipatory" by calling attention to the constant threat of destabilisation that women in Zambia experience because of persisting patriarchal structures, where Primorac contends that *The heart of a woman* depicts the "slippery" nature of Zambian society (conceivably referring to a metaphorical, consistently wet floor), these stories suggest a much more dire situation: the "turbulent" nature of Zambian society. This metaphor imagines a situation where an individual is stuck at sea in the middle of a raging storm. There is no hope of rescue, and the consequences of falling into the sea are grave. Such is the nature of the violent eruptions that threaten the lives of the women in the selected short stories.

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SUZYIKA NYIMBILI

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SUZYIKA NYIMBILI

*THE PLACE
OF THEATRE
AS A MEDIUM
OF MEMORY:
INSIGHTS FROM
ZAMBIA AND
HUNGARY*

Playwrights and theatremakers aim to create performances that resonate with diverse audiences. To create such performances, it is imperative to expose oneself to performances in different settings, beyond one's confinement or region. In my theatre-making experience, I have come to appreciate that despite the different contexts and locations under which theatremakers operate, they are connected through the art of storytelling. Despite the structural borders, walls, and limitations that exist, there is much closeness and uniqueness in what we make: theatre. In my interactions with theatremakers in different locations, be it in Lusaka or Harare, Vienna or Budapest, Austin or Atlanta, online or in person, there is much that connects theatremakers, the desire and passion for storytelling through theatre. The call for deconfining the work of creatives, including theatre makers, is, therefore, a call that is at the centre of the very work of creatives. Creatives are not meant to be confined unless its part of their creative aim. "The theatre", as a space of performance, and "theatre" as performance, not only bring performers and audiences together, but theatre is also a language that has the potential to bridge the gaps that exist among different settings and remind us of our closeness.

In this paper, I share my experience and understanding of closeness and proximity through theatre. Using examples of two stage plays from Hungary and Zambia, I argue that theatre, defined in this paper as “anything performed by live humans that incorporates language in front of a live audience”,¹ is a medium

¹ Stuart Spencer, *The Playwright's Guidebook: An Insightful Primer on the Art of Dramatic Writing*, First Edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

of memory and is a vital tool for interpreting and researching memories. The two plays discussed in this paper, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*, my own creation and *Ghetto Sheriff*, a creation of theatre artists in Budapest, Hungary, give insights into deconfining the interpretation of

theatre performances and how theatre is a medium of memory applicable in both Africa and Europe and other settings. As a theatre-maker interested in making memory plays, I consider theatre to be a medium of memory when it is used to invoke and question memory and to remind people of the past. Additionally, plays can be used as records for the future, thereby, helping society remember.

This paper utilises Stuart Spencer's² spectrum on storytelling to explain the effects of theatre on audiences which justifies the uniqueness of theatre in invoking and questioning memory. Spencer asserts that while films invoke feelings and emotions immediately (visceral response), and prose is contemplative and analytical, theatre combines the effects of film and prose, making it well-suited to getting a message across to an audience.

² Spencer Stuart is a playwright and author. <https://www.sarahlawrence.edu/faculty/spencer-stuart.html>

In the next section, I will address the concept of understanding and experiencing theatre by using two examples of stage plays, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*, and *Ghetto Sheriff*. Following the discussion of the two plays, I will bring in Spencer's spectrum of storytelling and the place of theatre before concluding.

EXPERIENCE AND UNDERSTANDING THROUGH THEATRE

The two plays, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* and *Ghetto Sheriff*, are plays I have experienced and find appropriate for use in this discussion. As a playwright, I am constantly aware that performance is not only a concept that ends on a stage or in a play, rather it extends into people's daily lives. This awareness helps me learn from day-to-day activities that people might not necessarily see as acts of performance. Such day-to-day activities may include how one walks, how politicians talk to the electorate, and how a Zambian man behaves in the presence of his in-laws. One of Shakespeare's most famous lines is "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players" from the play, *As You Like It*.³

} William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York, N.Y.: Washington Square Press, 1997), 83.

Much as it is "just" a line in a play, it has implications for understanding what goes on around us. The statement is a reminder of the constant performing nature of human beings. Whether in a play or not, there is a level of performativity in what humans do, and as noted by Shakespeare,

we are all players for all our lives. Being on stage or in a play is an extension of this performance nature of society, which justifies the argument that we can learn much from theatrical performances. I start the discussion with the play which I wrote and performed in, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*.

LENSHINA: THE BLOODY TRUTH

Since history is a mode of remembering, historical plays are a way of remembering the past and, hence, part of memory.⁴ The play

Lenshina: The Bloody Truth has been performed three times in Zambia. The first version of the play, performed on 27th September 2016, was titled *Lenshina: The Uprising*. In 2017,

the play was renamed to *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*, because “The Uprising” indirectly implied the Lumpa Church had risen against the state and, therefore, had “deserved” what happened to them. The usage of the words “The Uprising” aligned with the institutionalised memory of the conflict. Aside from the title change, the play increased its length by twenty minutes and gave more background to the conflict. The play attempts to tell the story of the conflict between the African Indigenous Lumpa Church and the colonial government working together with the nationalist party, the United National Independence Party, before Zambia’s independence in 1964. The conflict is believed to have led to the deaths of over 1,000 people,

while many more were forced to flee their homes.⁵

It is still the case that there are different interpretations of what the Lumpa church stood for and what led to so death of so many people due to the conflict. There is the established history following

a commission of inquiry into what led to the conflict, which asserts that the conflict arose due to the need by the government to stop a rebellion against authority which can be dated back to the early 1950s. An interpretation of this conflict and memory after 1991 emerged which sees the Lumpa disturbances of 1964 as more of a massacre than a rebellion against authority.⁶ This post-1991 interpretation emerged after a new neo-liberal-oriented regime came to power, exiled members of the Lumpa Church started to

⁴ Gordon, *Rebellion or Massacre?*

⁵ David M. Gordon, “Rebellion Or Massacre? The UNIP–Lumpa Conflict Revisited,” in *One Zambia, Many Histories* (Brill, 2008), 45–76.

⁶ A. Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Springer, 2016).

return to Zambia, and more open access to information and freedom of expression came into being. However, the old narrative of the fanatical Lumpa church persists as a collective memory.⁷ The play, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*, used theatre to create discussion and debate, and question this collective memory. The play attempts to reconstruct the memory of the Lumpa disturbances of 1964. Aside from using theatre for reconstructing the past, it can be used to reconfigure current happenings in order to construct memories directed toward the future. Therefore, the need for reconstructing memories does not end at merely reminding people about what happened in the past but also involves the need to seek a different future, dependent on the context and the need to carry out that which ought to be done.

7 Suzyika Nyimbili, "Lenshina: The Bloody Truth" (The Hub Theatre Zambia, 2016).

The play, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*, uses theatre to highlight the different ways people remember the conflict and why it is remembered that way. As a piece of historical and memory theatre, it shares both the established historical account and the post-1991 views that challenge the established historical account of the conflict. The goal is to allow the audience to receive arguments from both sides to challenge their memory about what had led to the death of people during the so-called "Lumpa disturbances".

8 Yvette Hutchison, *South African Performance and Archives of Memory* (Manchester University Press, 2013).

9 Patrizia Violi, *Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Space, History* (Peter Lang, 2017).

Since memory, as a concept, can refer to how something is remembered, theatre can be a means of remembering.⁸ As individuals, communities and societies remember, that which is transmitted about the past is not a faithful transcription of that past but rather takes the form of continuous reading and interpretation.⁹ As a consequence, theatre can be a tool that can be used to interpret memory. *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* questions the existing narrative about the question of who the members of the Lumpa church were, and how they lived. The play tries to bring to the picture a suppressed view and, thus, attempts to create a new memory by questioning an institutionalised memory.

Since history, like memory, cannot be taken as simply innocent activities of making a record of the past, it requires interpretation.

Additionally, not only does history go through interpretation, but it also goes through selection and even distortion.¹⁰ The case of the Lumpa disturbances has distortions that exist until now, and theatre and performance can play a role in questioning existing narratives by sharing the voices of those who are less represented or heard. In line with Burke's argument that memory-making goes through interpretation, selection, and distortion, Carlson¹¹ argues that cultural memory, just like the memory of individuals, is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts.

¹⁰ Peter Burke, *History as Social Memory*, in *Memory: History, Culture, and the Mind* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1989), 97–113.

¹¹ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (University of Michigan Press, 2003).

GHETTO SHERIFF

I watched the play *Ghetto Sheriff* in Budapest, Hungary in 2019. The play was eighty minutes long and was staged in total darkness. Whenever I narrate this experience, I highlight that I didn't "watch" the play, but rather that I experienced it. The entire play was performed in total darkness. The website where the play was advertised put up a question and an answer: "How can we talk about the biggest trauma of the 20th century, the Holocaust? According to the renowned director, János Mohácsi and his former students, we can do so with the help of Jewish jokes and songs, documents from the '30s and '40s, and by reciting them – in pitch darkness."¹² This description gives the reader a glimpse into what the play is about, and the different media used in the creation of this play including darkness.

¹² Örkény Színház, "Ghetto Sheriff," Örkény Színház, accessed December 14 2019, <https://www.orkenyszinhaz.hu/en/2012-09-17-12-53-31/repertoire?view=szinlap&id=1674>.

The texts used in the play were primarily based on personal memories, which were selected by the director János Mohácsi and the actors. To put together this play, texts from the film *Shoah* by Claude

Lanzmann and other sources such as “case studies, survivor testimonies, literary works, diary notes, historical sources, official reports and personal collections to evoke the historical period and the mood of the time”¹³ were used. These examples of sources are forms of memory media that are used to create play. Since the play is crafted into a theatrical performance, the play stands out as an independent creation and becomes a medium of memory.

13 Örkény Színház.

Aside from the different media used in *Ghetto Sheriff*, such as music and written work, pitch darkness was used as a significant part of the delivery of the play. The question remains as to what message is transmitted when a play is staged in total darkness while talking about the Holocaust. A play in the darkness could imply the darkness and sadness of the Holocaust. In this regard, the medium used, darkness, could be part of the message, which aligns with Marshall McLuhan’s “the medium is

14 Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (University of Michigan Press, 2003).

the message.”¹⁴ The playwright chose to have it performed in darkness for a reason. Darkness itself is a message or part of the play’s overall message. It can be argued that Darkness in *Ghetto Sheriff* was meant to depict the dark years of the Holocaust. A time of death, pain, and sadness.

Additionally, the eighty minutes of darkness and the hearing of discussions about the Holocaust are used in the play as a way of having the audience pay more attention to what they hear and not what they see on the stage. Members of the audience create their images in darkness, as opposed to plays or films that generate imagery for the audience. Instead of focusing on the exceptionality of the actors and their deserving of applause, the darkness helps the audience to focus more on the matter under discussion. This is not to say the performers were not exceptional, however, the theme of the play and the direction of the creator focused more on the message of the play, leaving everyone else in “darkness”.

Experiencing something in darkness can be chaotic. I once dined in total darkness at a restaurant and some of the diners left because of the disorder that ensued. Despite the chaos in the restaurant, the noise, and not knowing what was on my plate and where my glass of water was, I had a great conversation with the stranger I sat next to. With

the right strategy, the experience of darkness can be worthwhile. As opposed to the chaos in the case of the dinner in the dark, the theatre setting with *Ghetto Sheriff* helped the audience to focus. We didn't have to do much, except to sit and listen. As an audience member, I experienced the play as an individual without much focus on the collective experience. Although I could get a sense of the reactions of fellow theatre attendees during the performance, more of the collective experience came after the play as we stepped out. Otherwise, we sat down and followed the performance wherever the actors' voices came from. I have watched a fair share of stage plays. Ironically, one of the most memorable plays is one I never "watched" *Ghetto Sheriff*. After the play, I had a chat with one of the actors, to learn more about their experiences. This gave me more insight into their theatre-making process and was another reminder of the unconfined nature of the work we do: theatre-making. Having looked at the two plays independently, I will now bring in Spencer's spectrum on storytelling while discussing the two plays with a focus on theatre and memory.

THEATRE, MEMORY AND SPENCER'S SPECTRUM OF STORYTELLING

Whether performed inside a hall or created in an open space, with a script or without, in Budapest or in Lusaka, the immediacy of theatre in terms of how it affects audiences makes it relevant to our discussion on theatre as an effective medium of memory. In writing about theatre, Carlson asserts that theatre is a repository of cultural memory that provides

society "with the most tangible records of its attempts to understand its own operations."¹⁵ Based on Carlson's assertion, watching and engaging

15 Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*.

with plays can be a way of learning more about society, its fears, challenges, and aspirations among other things. This process is not limited to the performance only, the process of writing, rehearsal, advertising, and discussions after the play is part of the larger process of playmaking and experience. For some plays, like *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* and *Ghetto Sheriff*, the goal is not only to remember but also to speak to the present. Such plays also have implications for the future because they highlight the wrongs of the past in the hope that such wrongs are avoided in the future.

In making a piece of theatre, particularly a nonfictional theatrical work, a lot of time is taken to look at different media. Written work, videos, pictures, and so on help to create the story and ensure that a correct narrative is being projected. In the performance itself, aside from seeing performers on stage, different media such as video, lighting, sound, and set design can be used to get the message across. In the case of *Ghetto Sheriff*, the playwright uses darkness as a medium. The different strategies used to convey the message help the audience to grasp the intended message, though they can also have their interpretation. The way the stage or the space of the performance looks creates an impression of what the play is about and the

target audience.¹⁶ The message of all this stagecraft is important; however, it is never the whole message, as the audience members can interpret the message of the play differently depending on what is happening on the stage at different times.

As shown by Spencer, not only does theatre have a strong visual aspect which has an immediate effect on the audience, it also has the effect of prose; contemplation and analysis, things which are personal.¹⁷ Theatre can be distinguished from other art forms because it affects audiences emotionally, subliminally, and intellectually in a direct way.¹⁸ Below is an adapted version of Spencer's depiction of how theatre works compared to film and prose.

¹⁶ Spencer, *The Playwright's Guidebook*.

¹⁷ Nigel Llewellyn, "Honour in Life, Death and in the Memory: Funeral Monuments in Early Modern England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6 (1996): 179–200, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3679235>.

¹⁸ Gene A. Plunka, *Holocaust Drama: The Theater of Atrocity*, Cambridge Studies in Modern Theatre (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).



Figure -1 Spencer's comparison of theatre to film and prose;
Adapted from Spencer, 2002.¹⁹

Though *Ghetto Sheriff* did not have any visuals for the most part, it had an immediate and visceral effect. As an audience member, it allowed me to be part of a memory I never experienced. Allowing audience members to be part of a memory they never experienced also applies to *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth*. The difference is that the case of the Lumpa Church in *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* has no agreed narrative and is still controversial. There are still major disagreements, as can be seen from a newspaper article commenting on the play:

¹⁹ Spencer, *The Playwright's Guidebook*. p.10.

A play on such a controversial figure as Lenshina (original name being Regina) is always going to divide public opinion, and at the end of the performance on Friday, you could hear some members of the audience expressing strong opinions in the foyer with what they thought were some misrepresentations in the play. Both the writer and director must have expected this; the nature of the subject was always going to attract the other view.²⁰

²⁰ Kelvin Kachingwe, "Two Historical Plays in Town," *Newspaper, Zambia Daily Mail* (blog), April 7, 2018, <http://www.daily-mail.co.zm/two-historical-plays-in-town/>.

The goal for *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* was, therefore, not to take sides, rather to allow the audience to have an experience of different

arguments, and question what they have always known as the correct position on what transpired with the Lumpa Church.

When a play is staged or performed, the playwright, director, and actors are not the only ones in charge of interpretation. The audience has a role in interpretation, seeing as theatre is live, something which allows the audience to contemplate and analyse things in the moment. There is no controlling narrative voice, rather there are different

21 Spencer, *The Playwright's Guidebook*.

ways of viewing things.²¹ In the case of *Ghetto Sherriff*, the use of darkness further reduced the strength of the power of imagery, because audience members use their imagination more.

Though performative theories tend to look at the performance of memory as a real-life performance, such as via ways of doing things daily and not taking the form of a staged memory in a play, I argue that theatre is a good way of enabling the representation of people in a performance,

22 Gearoid Millar, "Performative Memory and Re-Victimization: Truth-Telling and Provocation in Sierra Leone," *Memory Studies* 8, no. 2 (April 1, 2015): 242–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513758.2015.1058888>.

and have them question their expected ways of performance in society.²² By performance in society, I refer to day-to-day patterns of life. If people can question their expected ways of the performance of themselves, and that of society, they can question memories too.

Theatre stands out in providing a new interpretation because it can use different media to interpret the past with the script being the first point of interpretation. When the playwright finalises the script and rehearsal starts, the rehearsals are combined with interpretation. Though very important in theatre, the script is open to changes and interpretation by the actors and directors, however, the playwright's consent is needed. The process of rehearsal allows actors and the director to create a piece of work that would be able to challenge the targeted audience so that when they are out of the theatre or space of performance, they would have had an experience that allows them to challenge their perspectives. The rehearsal process also changes the perspectives of the actors and the director. In my work as a theatremaker, I have had to change the direction of a play on several occasions following discussions and views shared during the rehearsal process.

In the case of the play on Lenshina and the Lumpa church, the contention is not only on how the followers of the Lumpa Church are branded but also about the fact that over 1000 people died in the conflict that ensued in 1964. There still exist two parallel explanations of what led to the disturbances. In the case of *Ghetto Sherriff*, the play is not disputing an already existing narrative of the Holocaust, rather it tells it from different perspectives using the experiences of survivors and a different medium: theatre in pitch darkness. Though it might be difficult to talk about, theatre, in the dark, creates an environment where a dark period in history can be discussed and remembered. One of the jokes in *Ghetto Sherriff* was, “How do Jewish kids play hide and seek? In through the door, out through the chimney.” “Insensitive” as the joke might sound, it’s a stark reminder of the Holocaust. Additionally, it shows how humour can be used to high-

light dark memories. Humour was used in both plays, and there were instances where the audiences were laughing, yet the memories contained within the two plays were not meant to be funny. Though there is no clear indication that the two plays helped communities remember or question, beyond the ones who watched the plays, the experience of being part of such plays allows for collective remembrance.²³

23 Tanveer Ajsi, “Footprints without Feet: Theatre as Recourse to Collective Memory in Kashmir,” *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 28, no. 3 (July 3, 2023): 414–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2023.2230150>.

CONCLUSIONS

The two plays, *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* and *Ghetto Sherriff*, though conceptualised in two different locations, Zambia, and Hungary respectively, speak the language of theatre and storytelling that theatremakers and audiences in different spaces and settings can identify with. The creators of these two memory plays use theatre as a medium of memory by speaking to themes that invoke memory. The plays combine different media to create one medium (the play) to invoke memory as well as question memory, as is the case with *Lenshina: The Uprising*. This shows commonality in the way theatrical plays are created. In both cases, the medium, which is the play, is not meant to be the message, the content of the play, though experienced differently, is what the message is. The concepts can, therefore, be applied in both the African (Zambia) and European (Hungary) contexts. It's a reminder of the closeness and proximity of artists, audiences, and stories themselves, despite our perceived differences because of distance, location, borders, and other settings that separate us.

The similarities in theatrical concepts and the overall message of the plays can be an entry point for collaboration in creating theatrical works meant to deconfine our worldviews. Having experienced both *Lenshina: The Bloody Truth* and *Ghetto Sherriff*, my conclusion is that concepts in both memory plays can be shared in the two contexts as they speak to similar themes of oppression and trauma.

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A BORDER OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES : CROATIA AND TUNIS

At its heart, this anthology is a collection of voices that navigate the complexities of freedom and limitations, questioning the borders of history, politics and human nature. Tunisian and Croatian authors have created a resonant experience with their individual stories whose threads and motives bound each other into a poignant tapestry – illuminating the humanity constricted within an inhumane path. The stories encapsulate people who are already boarded, be it artificially constructed by the employed for the status quo; a boarder of historical perspectives, or the liminal limbo of prisons that get created and imposed. Confronted with impossible erasure of identities, challenges of witnessing, responsibility and systemic unfairness brought upon innocent individuals risking their lives for the most natural of freedoms, provokes defiance and bravery of characters as well as challenging the readers to it. Clearing the principles of the human and exposing ones set by the artificial environment and politicized positions. Each narrative engages the reader in a different way, handling tensions, atmospheres and constructing imaginative perspectives that complement and extend the world that has inspired the process that followed.

The project of creating a theatre performance inspired by the four stories and connecting Tunisian and Croatian theatre professionals inhabited a deep interconnected reading of the stories that complements the ideas and themes positioned, and has been a strong and eclectic foundation for the creation of an inspiring and rewarding theatre process. The curation of these stories offered not only a thematic richness but even more rewarding – a resonance with the performative act of storytelling itself: a medium that constantly negotiates the boundaries of time, space, and human connection.

TEXTS ARE SELECTED THROUGH
A WRITERS' COMPETITION HELD BY
THE CROATIAN NATIONAL THEATRE
"IVAN ZAJC" RIJEKA AS PART OF
THE *DECONFINING PROJECT*

DOROTEJA ŠUŠAK

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DOROTEJA ŠUŠAK

ANATOMY
OF A POINT

*DO NOT LET ME
DISAPPEAR*

I
THE BREATH COULD
HAVE BEEN ALL OF US

Maybe with the Arvo Pärt's Da Pacem. Maybe not.

A line is formed by movement. If you move once and then again, it's possible, so, you're alive. And as you're trying to do so, the laws of physics help you, thus you keep moving until some external force compels you to detach from the established move. Even with that detachment, the continuation of the line is on your chest. If you give in to hysteria, the trunk and the centre of gravity preserved in the pelvis could completely yield to circularity, undulation and disruption until it ends up in an entirely harmonic dervish. Any disorganisation of the line leads to its re-establishment through the recognition of the faces that appear in it. Faces are characters. There can be one or countless of them. All are part of the line. The ones

perfectly straight or completely disrupted. And, at one moment, hysteric can become predictably hysterical, When it becomes predictable, is it hysterical? I don't know. I don't have answers to all the questions. I don't have answers to all of the questions. When I learned that a line in motion is just a collection of points, it seemed possible to stand on them and breathe. Maybe even sit down and say, "My line stops here, but it stops only for a few moments". If you need a little more time because your lungs are tired and you can't hold your breath for long, you take your imprint using it to thicken the point you're sitting on. The point is now bigger and more circular, giving you more space before it moves back into the line again. That's what I somehow thought. A point needn't be definitive if a new line is drawn from its centre. That's how I somehow thought. From the hips, you can also move your knees. You only need to be more focused. More aggressive. Surrender, but to yourself, not anyone else. A line is not a stroke because I hate strokes. That's happiness for the line. When I was pregnant with you, life seemed much more certain. I will be and soon you will also be here. I'm going to do everything necessary for your well-being. A line is not a stroke because I hate strokes. That's happiness for the line. Life is not a stroke because I hate strokes. That's a misfortune for life. I ran my fingers over the curvature of the skin that lined the inside of my body or at least everything is beneath the breastbone. I traced the line of the winding, bright red coils. The stretch marks were first of a blood red colour, then softer pink, until some went completely grey or faded like some old, skinny women. It's a lie that it takes years for someone to turn grey. Some events make you disappear immediately and you lose colour. I love grey, women's hair. I love grey, men's hair. That's happiness for the hair. From some detachments in life, no round point can be wide enough to provide you with as much breathing as you need. When you came into the world, you loved my palms. The strokes on them aren't strokes because we don't like strokes. I would tell you naive parables about the lines of life. The seam that divides the thumb from the rest of the fingers. The seam by which the line of the index finger is sewn all the way to the opposite edge of the palm. The lines of life on the palms are tree growth rings, are stretch marks, what are they? I don't know. I don't have answers to all the questions. I don't have answers to most of the questions. You were sliding down the slide, and when you suddenly sat on the ground after its edge, you cried only when you saw fear in my eyes. That's why I knew that

at the moment when far more serious detachments happen to us, you must not find a source of fear in my eyes. I'll have my eyes closed; I promise. Where are you? In all of this, many have to leave their children. In all of this, many have to lose their children. In all of this, many have to leave first and hope their children will arrive after them. In all of this, many have to send their children first, hoping they will meet them. In all of this, many will never have children. In all of this, many hold their children's hands. In the forest, in the sea, on the edge, in the boat, in the electric fence, in the line, in the barbed wire, at the barrier, at the border, in the documents that don't exist, in the non—existence. In all of this, many have to be ready to put up with themselves in detachments and points, just so that their children can see the line. When you fall to the ground after going down the slide, you ought to be more focused. Move your knees with the hips. Get up. Climb the slide. Extend the line. Or, at least deepen the point. It seems to me that I have reached the centre of the earth. Does it look the same to you?

II THE BREATH IS ONLY ME

*Maybe with the drumbeats reminiscent
of abdominal tremors. Maybe not.*

If only all of this could disappear somewhere, I would just take a cup of tea. I would drink it for a long time. The tea would have already cooled completely. It would happen so because I would drink it for hours. Drop by drop. Drop by drop. I'd especially focus on the taste in the mouth after the epiglottis is closed. Drop by drop. To anyone warning me that "enough is enough", "that something else needs to be done in life", or, worst of all, "that I'm wasting time", I'd drink it on purpose at least one drop

longer. I would emphasise that word incorrectly, just to make it clear how long it would actually take. I would pretend to be someone else and pretend to know all about the types of teas. I don't drink strawberry with vanilla because I'm sophisticated, I'm no longer a child. I only drink the types of tea that fine people deserve. Fine teas. Fine people are finely dressed, have fine passports to enter all the fine doors, go to fine places, have fine names, drink fine tea, and everything around them is fine. When fine people get really upset or something not really fine happens to them, they don't have to run away in a fine way. They don't have to walk anywhere for days and definitely don't have to run. They don't have to deny their children anywhere or deny them anything fine, and they certainly don't have to stay in the same clothes for long. They can change them as many times as it is necessary for them to feel good. Just the way they deserve. When fine people get irritated, they swallow fine pills taken from fine boxes that look like they're keeping a lock of a child's hair or at least the first fallen tooth, not some psychotropic drug. And when they swallow their fine pill, sometimes even without the tea because the positive reinforcement of their usual activity forces them to do so quickly, instructing the brain to start salivating, then they feel fine. When the epiglottis closes, they even feel a little thirsty, so they take a sip of some fine tea. And if all this could disappear somewhere, I tell you, I'd just have a cup of tea. Some time ago, I had no idea that all goods could be both quite ordinary, but also quite luxurious. Luxurious floral arrangements, luxurious fabrics, luxurious soaps, luxurious shoelaces, luxurious pillowcases, luxurious candles, luxurious hair mists, so what now? The world is made up of those who run away and wash their hair in water until it falls out strand by strand and those who stay and choose luxurious hair mists. Regardless, it's completely impossible to divide the world into "these" and "those" because it means nothing at all. The world can be divided into the old and new ones. In the hallway of the old world, Mother Europe, Mother Africa and Mother Asia brush the teeth of their offspring. All three mothers sometimes die for their children, and sometimes they let them die. Fathers can't even do that. They often run away somewhere. Wherever they go, I hear they like to go there with guns, even though afterwards it's supposedly not clear to anyone where they went. Full stop. A long, round dense point until someone quite pale and quite refined and quite luxurious steps into the "Tea Palace" and buys the "Ayurvedic Tea Tonic Collection". According

to a legend, tea was discovered quite by accident when the tree leaves fell into the water that was boiling for Emperor Shen Nong in China. It was in the 10th century BC. In the 6th century, Buddhist monks drank it in Japan. Tea only became present and popular in Great Britain in the 18th century. It reached Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries. Colonisers brought it. Regardless, tea is excellently produced in Malawi, Tanzania and Rwanda. A round point. If all of this could disappear somewhere, I would just take a cup of tea.

III THE BREATH IS ALL OF US

Maybe with the silence that often becomes too loud. Maybe not.

And tears catch the line. They tumble down in a weightless state along the shores of the cheeks. Some stop and cling with their tendrils to the lips and chin. Until they fall off the slide. When they fall off the slide, there is a deep puddle beneath you leading to the centre of the earth. Ophelia's pond. The head can be immersed in it, along with God's tears until the line of the leech pulls you all in. And the knees and hips and palms and round structures. Definitely the sharpness of the jaw and elbows, but also the gentleness of the cheeks and uterus. When you walk for days and sleep on the hard ground, lines appear on your body, such as you haven't recognised before. The musculature of the lower and upper legs rises through the edges of the thin skin. It looks as if the skin could be peeled off with gentle lines from the centre outwards, laterally without much effort, and certainly without using the nails. Like when you peel off the inner, mesh coat of the pomegranate after someone long ago tore off the bright-red covering

above it. When someone tells you that you no longer go by the name you used to or that the sum of those letters doesn't guarantee civil rights and that you have no refuge or shelter, lines appear inside the chest, such as you haven't recognised before. The line you stretch to sign is hard to get out of the wrist, but it can be pulled out with regular exercises and rehabilitation in a pool of mirroring water. When you are nameless and landless, you're still human. Then perhaps most in your essential sense. Do not let them convince you otherwise, no matter how much a shattered soul resembles the melted honeycomb. Not everything can be licked, something simply has to spill over the edge of the table. From the line into the point. In those moments, the line can scare the one who draws it. Pulls it. Strikes it through. Sometimes it seems to me that all my lines have the density of a trampoline. On the ECG they are knee and elbow shaped. Sharp in meaning. On the EEG, they are jagged and wrinkled like a crumpled tapestry or aggressively trimmed bangs. A line is not a stroke because I hate strokes. That's happiness for the line. Misfortune for the stroke. Mathematicians underline strokes. Statesmen underline strokes. Border guards underline strokes. Customs officers underline strokes. Controllers underline strokes. Rivers and forests without bridges underline strokes. No one's lands underline strokes. Strokes are sharp lines that have been emptied from shyness, childishness and spatiality. They remain and so does their flatness and fairness. Strokes are best drawn with chalk, "this far you may, one, two, three". It is with the strokes that the need for a breath ends. With the horizontal ones laid on the wrist. The line, however, has no end unless you meet it with a stroke. Life has no end unless you meet it with a point. I spilled ink on the sand—pit with my elbow to make a spacious enough point for a big break. After that, I decided to get up. I moved my knees with my hips. With my arms, I climbed up the slide. The new descent won't lead to a point or a stroke. Any shift will be welcomed until in the reflection I seem to be resembling myself before the departure. I took a cup of tea. Vanilla with strawberry. The new descent is going to draw a new line. And so to the centre of warmth where neither colours, names nor refinement differs, but civility and incivility, serration and roundness, linearity and drawn strokes do.

IVA PAPIĆ

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IVA PAPIĆ

MEISTENS
BETTLER,
MEISTENS
GESINDE

“Illegal migrants!” Renata explains to us, as if we needed any explanation, while we are approaching the camp of Middle Eastern refugees in Vojvodina.

“Illegal migrants, that’s what they call them!” she repeats once again giving us a side-eye glance from the driver’s seat. “What then are the legal ones?”

“Legal ones are those who come in accordance with the law, namely, with the consent of the country they are entering”, Kika answers coldly, staring with her icy grey eyes at the men sitting in front of their tents that are behind high wire fences.

“So, they aren’t migrants, they are immigrants. Or colonists”, Renata frowns upon us again.

“Yes”, Kika responds coldly. “Actually, we are looking at refugees”, she scoffs disdainfully adding “However, it is politically correct and certainly acceptable to call them migrants. That word doesn’t hold weight. It’s neutral.” She takes tobacco from her bag and puts a white filter between her lips.

“Yes”, confirms Renata.

I remain silent, looking through the camp fence. “I won’t start until you turn that off!” said Svetozar Cvetković at the beginning of a play at the Belgrade *Atelje 212* Theatre. It was pitch dark on the Small Stage, and his opening monologue had to take place in such darkness. There was a faint light from mobile phones behind me. “I won’t start until you turn that off!” repeated the actor. Then someone from the audience shouted “Go outside, man! He won’t start until you turn your mobile phone off!” The man turned it off, and the velvety voice of old Cvetković spilled throughout the auditorium.

“I won’t start until you turn that off!” resounds in my ears as Renata parks the car in front of the barbed wire of the refugee camp. If only I could say the same!

“I won’t start until you call things by their real names, until you stop embellishing phenomena with inflated euphemisms and manipulating with terminology in order for the shame to sting less”. However, what ideologists don’t know, while the quantum physicists could explain to them very well, is that you cannot influence one without automatically influencing the other, actually most often with what you do not even want to manipulate. Namely, in that terminologically conditioned reduction of reality, it is not only shame that is reduced, naturally, the shame of those who feel the pressure to react as humans to the suffering of others, but the eyes are also closed to other layers of that migration phenomena. Refugees from the war, hunger, poverty, slavery and despair, flee to the European Jerusalem to live at least half the life that we, with satisfied and dulled senses, shrink from while complaining; their wish to survive is stronger than our satisfied needs. It could be that they are only tools in the games of the powerful ones; perhaps the pain in their stomach does not allow them to see that their desires are just a string by which their bodies play like puppets. However, no one would consciously agree to be in pain, to be a puppet, to have neither the cake nor eat it. All mass human phenomena are just reactions...

“I won’t start until you turn that off!” I whispered in the stopped car.

“It’s hard not to have a vice. Health is for the healthy”, he winks at us ironically smiling while taking us to the container where we have to leave things from Renata’s trunk. “And those who are content”, he adds.

Renata doesn’t introduce us, knowing very well we won’t remember the names anyway. And in such occasions, the name is even unnecessary. I’ll call him He. We go back from the container to his tent. We sit on a blanket spread out in the sun. It is with relief that I notice the guardhouse nearby.

“I’ve brought you cigarettes; share them if you want.” Renata hands him a paper bag.

He takes it readily and then hides it quickly in his tent. He wasn’t quick enough: other men that are just as stiff in putting up with the burden of the day, sitting in the Sun as we do, jerked as animals do when smelling danger: such things being felt before they are seen.

“Vices have existed forever, just as addiction. Also, both definitely have their function. Try giving up smoking, and you’ll see”, he winks at Kika who starts rolling as soon as we sit.

“Nonsense!” Kika laughs. “I’ve been smoking since I was seventeen.”

“I since I was thirteen. These,” he points to an open pack of cigarettes. “These are my twenty best friends “, he laughs. “I stopped smoking six months ago. I didn’t have money and I felt something burning in my chest. I knew a kind of sickness was to come my way so I decided to quit. The physical addiction disappeared in three days. It’s not a problem. The psychological addiction isn’t a problem either, they are just rituals whose significance you can take away as soon as you demystify them. The problem is much deeper. Longing is the problem. With a big L. L for Longing. Desire with a big D. The body begins to long. Addiction is just an anaesthetic.” He puts a cigarette in his mouth and lights it skilfully.

In groups of four or five men sit on blankets spread on the grass. I fear their suppressed strength. All they can do is sit, while I feel they would do anything except for that.

“It’s like that on the physiological level. It’s not imagination. Everything that creates addiction is a neurotoxin. Namely, it provides artificial pleasure while killing nerve endings in return. It’s like the fairy tale on the little mermaid: she gets legs, but loses her voice. So do we addicts, we get that short pleasure, that artificial orgasm the price of which is the death of a part of our own body. But the real pleasure is not that artificial orgasm, no. The real pleasure is stifling the true one, which addicts realise only when they lose their substance. I couldn’t. As long as I didn’t smoke, I didn’t crave a cigarette, no. Quite the contrary and totally unexpectedly, I craved everything else. I wanted fine food, I wanted strong legs, I dreamt of walking on brightly lit streets while the moisture of the washed asphalt glistened in the light of shop windows, I wanted to eat fried peanuts and candied almonds, to walk slowly in a cloud of thoughts pleasing to the body, I wanted to feel soft wool on my skin, a silky scarf, I wanted much and a lot, all the senses wanting everything I couldn’t give them. Everything I had ever dreamt of attacked me as if all of my desires, like devils, had suddenly flown out of Pandora’s box”, he laughed while extinguishing the cigarette in the grass next to the blanket.

“I craved a woman,” he said quietly, “but not just any woman. I craved the touch of a woman who desires me. I longed to feel her hand trembling as she passed over my chest, and to feel how she was opening to me as a flower to the rain. I wanted more than I had ever dared even to think. I lasted barely two weeks. Desires kept piling up: my senses, until then anaesthetised with vices, screamed with hunger, suddenly, all in the same voice, while my body was similar to a nest of hungry chicks. I was thirsty and hungry at the same time, and just beginning to open my eyes, and just beginning to hear, and just beginning to sing, and just discovering sexuality, and greed and lust and passion and cry for help and despair. I thought I would entirely disappear in the abyss of the unquenchable desire. I called my twenty friends to help. And some bottles of beer. But,” he smiled with his yellow teeth, “vice doesn’t sedate desire only as desire is just the other

side of pain. Choose: would you like to feel the pain twice as little or twice as much? If you cannot but suffer the pain, I think the answer is clear. What do I need legs for if they can't be strong, they can't endure miles and miles? If every step hurts like that of the little mermaid because legs want to devour, while they can only tap lightly in a circle, wouldn't it then be easier to numb them? Have you ever had your heart so filled with desire that you shudder to think it will either spill out or burst? If I were a poet, I might even wish to suffer such a torture of Desire. Perhaps then it would make sense. If I were a poet I would probably continue to crave and maybe find in it some kind of the orgiastic self-satisfaction. But, I am not. I'm just an ordinary man. I crave food, comfort, a woman; if I have neither of these three, then I don't think that sedation is bad. On the contrary, vice is God's gift which God provided taking pity on slaves and lepers. That's when you adjust your dose yourself. Actually," he grinned, "you increase the dose. This is how the states have found a perfect answer to all the unrest; they only make the borders a little more porous."

* * * * *

Renata is Hungarian, originally from *Batina*. She got married in *Osiyek*.

"I was quite a lively little girl", she says as she drives us in her official car of the *Draž* fire brigade.

Our itinerary is simple: we first have to leave some things from the trunk for the refugees in the Banat region of Vojvodina, then leave Kika in *Novi Sad*, finally to return to *Osiyek* in the dark night.

"My grandfather used to beat me because I was worse than boys", Renata tells us. "Even they did not dare to enter the ossuary under Julka's feet. And not only did I dare to walk among the bones, but I did it knowing I would get beaten at home."

She laughed without any shame or intention, as if we had known each other since childhood. Such a laughter is contagious, we also laughed together with her.

“Never in my life have I met such a grounded and reliable person.”

Kika described Renata when we were about to leave for the trip, and I cannot but agree with her. She is built like a man, with a large torso and thin limbs; keeping her hair long only so that she can tie it into a ponytail. Though she got married in *Osijek*, she, like Kika, cannot escape the magic of *Banovo brdo* (Ban’s hill) so that she works for the *Draž* fire brigade and also as a security guard of industrial halls.

“I’d rather travel every day than not be on the Danube”, she assures us in the car as we leave Baranja and *Osijek* and, on the purple road, sometimes green from the moss growing in the mossy dampness even on the asphalt, we head towards *Erdut*. “I told my husband ‘I got married in *Osijek*, but never ask me to be called an *Osijek* woman.’”

They went to Hungary during the war and then her native *Batina* dropped to less than a thousand inhabitants, never to recover again. Renata hated being a refugee as, although being a Hungarian and speaking Hungarian in the exile, the welcome melted as quickly as a cake on the summer table. “We went to school in separate shifts and though I knew Hungarian I attended the Croatian one, with Croatian teachers and the Croatian teaching material. In the beginning we were welcomed with open arms, but as the time went by, it became increasingly clear that we were living on their backs, though, again, we were not to blame for that. Children do what adults say so that soon our peers would wait for us on the way home from school and throw dirty soil or some rubbish at us; in shops we were barely greeted and often driven away for fear that we would steal something. I don’t know any Hungarian who did not return to Croatia at the end of the war. Now that everyone is in one’s own country, we cooperate excellently”, Renata smiled at us over her shoulder.

It is her own experience of a refugee that is the reason why she became active in the *Osijek* branch of the Red Cross once she learned about the refugee crisis, which in swollen waves attempted to destroy the fortress of their Promised Land. Her activism was also the reason for our arrival, actually, the items that could not be sent by the Red Cross van, primarily cigarettes and alcohol, and which Renata herself brought to refugee camps. This time she took the two of us, Kika, who was returning to Vojvodina, and I, accompanying her and following our common theme of research, the one through which we met, namely, the history of the Danube, its swamps and its *Banovo brdo*. Many victims fell to the Danube. In the car, Renata spoke with her family over the phone in Hungarian.

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“As a child, I played the clarinet”, he tells us after two beers which Renata skilfully pulled out of her backpack. “At the age of twelve, I had a lesson in public and my mother asked me if I wanted her to come. ‘I don’t care’, I replied. No, I lied. To be honest, I didn’t want to burden her because she had just come from work, and she worked two jobs at the time. That afternoon, when I was supposed to have a public lesson, was her only free afternoon of the week”, he squinted at the sun, which, around noon, was already boldly piercing the grey clouds.

“I played, I remember, a composition with a lot of one—sixteenths”, he continued. He liked to talk and he did it well. His sincerity, further fuelled by beer, made him quite interesting. If I hadn’t been shy, I would have asked Renata for a beer, too. But I knew that this one was meant for him.

“That year it was for the first time that I had one—sixteenth notes in larger quantities, and they pressed on me as if I had chains around my hands because my fingers just wouldn’t fly the way I wanted them to. I lied to my mother telling her I didn’t care whether she came to see me or not, adding that she had already been to so many of my concerts that it really didn’t matter if she missed one. I played, now I’ve remembered,

Clarinet Express, that was the name of the composition by A.J. Dervaux. It's a wonder how I've just remembered Dervaux, as never before nor later did I play his compositions. Had someone asked me, I would have said that I had forgotten him forever." He paused for a moment, looking wistfully at some dark point in his memories, resembling a shadow.

"Anyway, when I repeated to my mother once more that I didn't care if she came or not, she stopped in the middle of the kitchen that was connected to the living room, and, leaning on her hands, with a cloth hanging from her hand and down her thigh, she looked at me questioningly for a few seconds. 'Are you serious?' she asked me, and to remove any doubt I replied, 'And will you be offended now if I tell you that I don't care if you come or not?' She calmly responded, 'Well I will!' and then she started to approach with slow steps, still in the middle of the kitchen, 'And, have you...' she began to speak still in the middle of the kitchen, 'Have you maybe said that you don't care because you don't want to burden me?' she finished just as she was sitting down on the couch next to me, 'But, you actually want me to come ever so badly, yet not wanting to seem selfish', she leaned toward me and gently tickled me under the armpit. 'Maybe a little...' I remember barely squeezing out through laughter. 'Don't hide your desires from me!' she gently scolded me and, still hugging me, she promised to come." He took the last sip of beer and threw the can into his tent.

"That was my last concert. The next year they told me the clarinet is a Jewish instrument, so I quit. Can you believe it? That even instruments have nationality?" he clicked his tongue a few times, licked his lips and wiped them with his sleeve.

"You see, the plan was for me to go first, and then to earn enough for my sisters. Although, to be honest, my mother doesn't care where she is as long as she's close to those she loves. She understood well that the tastiest bread is the one you love, and not the one that looks best. Nevertheless, she didn't succeed in teaching me that. Even though I love her, I hate the bread she bakes. If they brought me back now, I think I'd hate it even more than when I left. I was lured with a dream. For years I've

been smelling that Swabian bread, which, however, I've never tasted. Those overseas smugglers earn more from that dream than from our misery. Mother knew well that every master tramps you down. I trusted others more."

* * * * *

Kika originates from *Banovo brdo*, just like Renata. She left when the war began. When Baranja fell, her father took them to their relatives in Novi Sad. As there was nowhere to go back for a long time, it's there that Kika completed her secondary school and university education.

"My mother remained in *Popovac*." I remembered that she used to refer to her grandmother as mother, while her real mother was just *mama*.

"If only you knew how many times, we've travelled this road..." Kika said as we were crossing the *Erđut—Bogojevo* border. It was crowded because, due to migrants, border—guards were meticulously inspecting each car, while previously, seeing three women in a car, they would just wave to them.

"Almost every weekend to see my mother in *Popovac* and then back to Novi Sad on Sunday evening", Kika recalled. "Borders were open. There even weren't these borders back then... We'd just drive across the Danube, from one night to another. Always cross the Danube..."

"Do you see these tracks on the road?" Kika asked when we finally crossed the border. "That's from tanks... Hundreds of tanks crossed this road. Some of them were always parked next to the border. I hated the border." She fell silent as Renata drove through harvested cornfields and past abandoned relics of concrete plants, blending with the greyness of the misty sky in the autumn morning.

"Then mother fell ill and so my *mama* returned to *Popovac*. Only then did I cross the border every weekend, which, was no longer a

border... As long as mother wasn't ill, I could occasionally avoid it by staying in the flat, but once *mama* was back in *Popovac*, skipping a weekend was tantamount to a sacrilege. The tanks never moved. Always the same." She squinted with her icy grey eyes at the first rays of the Sun, which were tenderly piercing through the thick clouds.

"Then mother died and *mama* didn't want to leave *Popovac* anymore. She was tired of moving and she stayed under *Banovo brdo* until she died. Hadn't we sold the house after her death I think I might have gone back. It's possible now. "

* * * * *

"I've never seen forests like these in my life!" he told us already visibly tipsy, spreading his arms wide and laughing with his mouth wide open.

"Here the forests rise from the water, trees grow from huge ponds stretching for several dozen square meters, and there are some even larger and if I hadn't known that the water in them reached just below the knees, I would have thought these ponds were lakes. The soil here is different. Stepping into it fits stepping into sand, but the sand slips off your shoes as soon as you step out, while here the soil sticks to your shoes, makes them heavier and it feels as if I were walking with weights around my ankles. This foliage, whose colourfulness makes you sigh, is light in towns only, on the asphalt. In the woods, it's like dough sticking over you, literally gluing you to the ground, making it impossible for you to take another step without sinking into the new sediment of the slump that presses you with its weight more and more. I came to know your forests last year. Never again!" The Sun was fading in the early afternoon hours, and the wind continued to swirl the colourful leaves that gathered around the camp.

"We tried to cross the Danube over *Fruška gora*. There are not many settlements there so we thought there wouldn't be much border control. We had a compass and always headed west. Only west. Also,"

he raised his index finger, "*Fruška gora* forests are tame, there are not many dangerous animals, so we believed we'd be safe. The plan was to cross *Fruška gora*, reach *Spačva*'s forests and then make our way through *Bosut*'s primeval forests to the EU. That was our goal. You know that saying, "You can get asylum in Croatia, you just need to get into Croatia!" he laughed bitterly, and Renata nodded sympathetically.

"It was autumn, like now," he continued the story opening a new beer. "It was raining. Rain could never discourage me before. Here, it rains for days. Literally days. Day after fit the same way. I followed it: every now and then its sound would become stronger and then I would think that now it'll also get stronger, finally to stop. But, no, it was just a wind that would rock the branches harder with the rain water flowing down from them even harder. It rains here meticulously, relentlessly, as if God were an excellent drummer that could keep the same pace for days; the Sun and the Moon rise and set, the land soaks, soon pouring off it, rivers swell and rivers pour out, but in vain, God keeping the rhythm always uniformly, not losing a single beat, not waving a single chord. The rain was falling for days and dried leaves with it; the wind carried them through the air in short swirls and with them, as with the water, it blew them on us. There were only three of us. This time we didn't want to pay anyone to take us over the border. That's also a lottery. We studied maps for a long time, crossings and online maps. We thought that the way we decided to go would sooner or later bring us to the Danube, anyway, it was the wilds and we only had to follow the compass and have the location on our mobile. That's what we thought. But, of these forests of yours we are not worthy opponents. It was November and our trousers were torn on the stalks of the dead grass. Seriously! That summer the grass reached the thighs, and as it had already shed the leaves, had actually died, only its stalks remained, sticking out in the air, like markers on our graves. I'd have thought that dead stalks would be somewhat softer... I also didn't know that it was only winter that was going to finish them off and finally lay them on the ground. Perhaps we should have waited for the winter, but I was more afraid of winter than of the efreet. I also thought that vegetation was at least going to protect us, if anything the few leaves that hadn't fallen yet. Because, when the winter comes, everything is bare. Bare. Ground becomes bare like a woman when

she takes the clothes off. It's only then that can you see everything, how beautiful she is and how ugly, all at once. Anyway, it rained for days and we were wet for days. There was no point in hiding under the trees as the rain flowed down from them just as it poured out from the soaked ground, as if all were fed up, wanting to fit to someone else. But who to? Our shoes and trousers were already falling apart from the rain and moisture, and I looked at the trees and thought: how fit enough for you to finally start to rot? Some trees had their roots literally in water, their feet in water, as old women in a wash tub, but none of this happens with the trees which stand upright as if they were on the mountains, only their trunks darken slightly. I remember being confused, how fit that everything here constantly decays, yet nothing dies?! What kind of life is this that constantly feeds on its own vomit? Even death is transient here... It dies and comes back to life again! I've seen such trees here: a decayed trunk, rotten as a rotten apple, you touch it and it falls apart, it's also broken in half by a thunder, and from such a trunk, three new trees can grow. 'These are its daughters,' the guard tells me. Willows, I know you know them. Willows. They can deceive even death. And then, once I got used to the uniform rhythm of the rain, then something changed, the rhythm remained the same, but the drummer increased the dynamics and the drops of rain as large as a thumb started falling on us. They even stung a little when hitting the top of the head. Fog came along with them and we couldn't see a thing. Deceptive is this swamp of yours: you keep falling into some holes of rotting stumps or the like, which were artfully hidden by thin layers of soil and leaves, then you fit in some ditches, some dried—up arms of rivers, fall into some abandoned canals, fall into the mud lakes that are knee—deep, sometimes rising, sometimes falling, and all fit on a flat surface. While falling, you wonder how fit that you think you're falling from one plane to another and how fit that you're climbing from one plane to another? We encountered people only once. As we were running out of food, we came close to a village to steal a chicken or two. It was dusk and we trod through the furrows of plough fields as if stomping grapes; we wanted to get to a small forest as soon as possible. But it wasn't a small forest, it was a planted forest of young fir—trees meant to be cut for Christmas trees in a few months. Then we walked across another plough field to the forest that, judging by the roofs of houses, seemed to separate the plough fields from the village, at least from a distance. It turned out to be a week—

end settlement. Instead of food, we found two men. One was walking with a kind of a shoulder machine while the other was digging with a shovel where the first man had pointed. At first, we thought they were cops so we started running across the fields, certain they had seen us. That's when everything went downhill. We were hungry and the forest was full of mushrooms. We mistook toadstools for edible mushrooms. Those two men from the weekend settlement were metal detector guys, poor just like us. They reported us to the police and in this way, they saved our lives. Had we not been found; I doubt we'd have survived another rainy night in the forest."

"Have you fallen for seductresses (jack-o'-lantern mushrooms)?" the nurses in the hospital emergency ward laughed.

"We thought they were bolete mushrooms." I could barely utter it.

"Hahaha!" they teased us, though not maliciously. "They aren't called seductresses for nothing! Hahahaha!"

* * * * *

I started this journey guided by my research fit into the colonisation of eastern Slavonia, Baranja and today's Vojvodina after the departure of the Ottomans.

"I won't start until you turn that off!" Cvetkovićev's voice still fit in my head.

"I won't start until you turn that off!" If only I could condition others like that.

Colonisations, namely, legal migrations as they would be called today according to the politically correct terminology, began immediately after the expulsion of the Turks. The first focal point which, according to the opinion of the Emperor Charles VI, cried out for German population, was Banat, the very place where refugee camps are now emerging,

getting closer and closer to *Horgoš*. *Schwäbische Türkei* was the name for the Germans settled on his Baranja estate by the Savoy Prince, some of whom later went to Banat. However, the real colonisation began in the year 1712, and *meistens Bettler, meistens Gesinde*, “mostly beggars, mostly servants” were sent into the “grave of Germans”, as German newspapers called Baranja, Bačka and primarily Banat.

“I won’t begin until poverty stops being called opportunity!”

The reason for settling these homeless people, drunkards and prisoners, that “ballast of German principalities” as they were called, was, of course, political. The Emperor Charles VI needed German settlers as a buffer between Romanians, Hungarians and Serbs, who would stabilize German values and loyalty to the emperor in these newly conquered territories, and also break the compactness of each of the three national communities preventing thus their possible alliance. However, that “ballast of German principalities” fell like flies in the swampy Baranja and Banat: killed by malaria, typhus, dysentery, plague and wars with the Turks which would resurrect every few years. Romanians and Serbs would steal their cattle and, due to the high mortality rate, the disease of German colonists was called *morbis Hungaricus*. They had no drinking water as it took several generations of the dead for them to realise how high the groundwater was and how deep they had to dig wells; the land did not yield crops because it was impossible to drain the swamp in a year; living in muddy and cold wickerwork houses, randomly arranged like tents in refugee camps where dry reeds often seemed to catch fire on its own, also mould and disease was spreading much faster than the offspring was born. In the absence of doctors, the sick and the hungry would die. To prevent the increasingly frequent escapes of German colonists, it was the Austrian hajduks, *Nationalhaiducken*, who were in charge, that is, the same ones who rose against the Turks twenty years ago. In other words, the “ballast of the German principalities” was sent to death through legal migrations, while the Austrian hajduks guarded them from escaping death or illegal migration. To threaten someone with migration to Banat was as if they would have to go to the gallows.

In order to prevent increasing deaths and the bad reputation that the institution of legal migrations had gained in Banat, it was for the second wave of settlement initiated by the daughter of Charles VI, the Archduchess Maria Theresa, that it was necessary to engage in propaganda in order to realise the pietistic idea of the Austrian *Gesamtmonarchie*. The canonical advisor Ignac Kemp composed a nice package of lies in which the immigrants were promised a house, land, cattle and seed upon arrival, as well as the forgiveness of war dues and taxes for up to six years (because it was silently omitted that the swamps had to be drained first). However, not everyone believed him, although, if there hadn't been wars and hunger, this time they would have succeeded in picking up beggars and prisoners with a shovel and in sowing them in Banat like a handful of rotten seeds. In vain. The grave of the Germans did not become any milder. New settlers arrived who with their corpses seemed to pave the way through the swamp by which the weapons and food could be safely transported for a new campaign against the Turkish Empire. Did they know that their lives served for that purpose only?

“I won't start until things are called by their real name!”

In the end, the colonisation succeeded; the swamps of Banat and Baranja were drained with great efforts and sacrifices, and the canals, which finally revealed fertile land to the colonisers as fit were gold, were named after the emperors and archdukes of the Austrian ruling house. In the 1920s, the *Schwäbisch—deutscher Kulturbund* was founded in Novi Sad, namely, the Swabian—German Cultural Association within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and even though the lives of their ancestors were scattered like a handful of seeds in the rotten swamp, there were no greater patriots and fiercer Nazis than the Yugoslav *volksdeutsche*s. Originally they were called Turkish Swabians.

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“Of course, there are cells, what kind of a question is that?” he sneered at me, “You're saved because you're Renata's, otherwise you wouldn't last long here...” he stopped because Renata grabbed his hand.

“Sorry,” I was sincere. This wasn’t the first time I reacted to uncomfortable and difficult situations by asking stupid questions as if my foolishness could diminish what was pressing on me. I was thinking like an ostrich, namely, if I’m stupid, then they’re stupid too, and then everything is stupid!

“We are being recruited around the camp by those who already have asylum. It’s known through whom and for whom some tasks that need to be done are carried out. If some prove themselves, they have a better chance of swimming soon across the *Tisa* near *Horgoš*. If they skilfully collect enough packages from the Tisa...”

He grinned without any remorse.

“A crime is revenge. Only liars say they regret the revenge”, he bit his lower lip, already visibly drunk.

“Until when like this?” he spread his arms. “Neither up nor down! And the hole just keeps growing...” he turned his head away from me as if he was disgusted to even look at me. But I knew I was just a part of the totality that disgusted him.

“You’re funny...” he mocked me, and for him I lost my identity and became just a symbol. “You think that if you sweeten things they will become sweet? Hahaha!” he laughed provocatively and scornfully.

“I don’t owe anything to anyone”, he looked at me with hatred. “And I doubt I’ll ever collect my debts.”

Indeed, Kika was returning with us to *Novi Sad*, but it wasn’t that she went to Baranja just to compare the ethnology of the Slavonian and Vojvodinian swamps. She’s never that straightforward. In Baranja, besides her profession, she went to see yet another house on *Banovo brdo*, having planned her escape from *Novi Sad* for years and an

idyllic life somewhere at the foot of Mons Aureus, however, her plans never went beyond dreaming.

While touring Baranja wells, wayside shrines, steep narrow mountain paths, wine cellars and abysses of collapsed rocks that slid down the *Banovo brdo* into the Danube, which for centuries used to melt the mountain just as the tongue melts ice cream, I visited with her a few houses for sale: an old Swabian with a porch, a well and a walnut tree in the middle of the yard in *Kneževi Vinogradi*, an old hunting lodge at the mouth of the *Karašica* into the Danube, a dilapidated mud and reed house, an old wickerwork house that from the top of *Banovo brdo* threatened the Danube and whose yard was spread with the branches of a fallen tree like an octopus. All the houses were good, but for each of them Kika asked the same question, “What do I need that for?”. Eventually, her solitude would convincingly deter her from realising the dream. As if doing something for oneself is not a motive strong enough or the reason to actually do it. For the family, for children, for some development or goal we become capable of moving mountains and valleys, but, when faced with our own reflection only, we can see how each undertaking is full of holes as Swiss cheese, and we admit that even if the undertaking is truly fulfilled in all its ideal perfection, we won't find the happiness we seek, namely, unambiguous, uniform and absolute, the one for which we are willing to make sacrifices and the one from which, at the end of the day, we throw ourselves on the bed with a smile on our lips. It seems that without a “higher purpose” no one would leave their own basement.

“I have a problem,” Kika says coldly as we travel from Banat to *Novi Sad*. “I hate”.

She fell silent, but we knew her silence was just a preparation before beginning to speak. Sometimes the weight of the autumn fog in the swamp doesn't allow anything else to be said except confessions. Hate is a heavy word, but it also has its shades.

“I know exactly what your friend was talking about when he talked about addiction”, she addressed Renata. “I quit smoking just

as unsuccessfully as he did, two years ago. I didn't last longer than two weeks. It wasn't because of a crisis, and he was right about that as I didn't need a cigarette to calm my body. No. It calms my anger. Wherever I was back then, whoever I was talking to back then, mostly in larger gatherings, I would look at people and instead of their faces and their words, I would see and hear only my own anger growing inside me and erupting. They are all the same, content with little, biting and fighting each other for that little, pretending to be modest, and not even realizing how capable they are of dipping their arms in blood up to the elbows, whenever they are provoked or called out, all of them with fake smiles to hide their stupidity... And me? I'm not calm unless I break something, unless saliva and blood boil, unless it hurts stronger than what's inside... The pains were fighting inside me. I would talk to people, and in my head, I would imagine myself knocking over the tables in front of us and tearing down the ceiling above us, wielding a whip and using its tip to strip off false epaulettes from the raised shoulder straps, jumping like a frog onto the walls and with the fire from my throat I melt the plastic of the wax masks they love ever so much... I hate. I am furious and I hate it", she said putting the index and middle finger of her right hand over her lips and nose, resting her chin on the palm of her hand. She gazed through the window at the endless plains of the drained swamps of Banat, where the gaze rested as if looking into the depths of the sea.

"It was then that I craved a cigarette when at the same time I was afraid of my anger and indulged in it like a succubus. A cigarette suffocates everything in its smoke, everything mine implodes in it. My dummy. My comforter. And with it, I can move among people again. This is why I didn't last. Every time I light it, I suppress myself. And that's good for me. As, obviously, I don't know how to deal with myself alone..." she paused for a moment, rummaging through her handbag, doing what women do every time they want to stop themselves from crying. Renata and I were silent and let her speak. The night was falling outside, and on the horizon, a purple sunset shimmered over the plough fields. In the car, the twilight was as warm as an embrace.

"Why do you think I've been looking for a perfect house under *Banovo brdo* for years? "Kika provocatively asked me, looking at me

as if blaming me for my stupidity, which, consequently, prolongs her hope. “I know in advance that I won’t buy it, but I keep thinking that if I find a perfect one, it will fill that well in me that cracked and dried up a long time ago, and no matter how much I pour into it, it all spills out. My underground waters were cut off then when we had left. Our land and our wells dried up. Something is deeply missing in me, in myself I’m crying out for something, but I can’t fill it with anything, except for the pain. If I don’t numb myself, the well in me screams even more, asks for more, pleads for more, cries more and more, and I have nothing to feed it with, nothing to satisfy it with. Only the pain can deceive it. And then it’s even more painful. If I return, if I find that perfect house under *Banovo brdo* with a porch, a well and a walnut tree, with tulips and jasmines in flower beds, with three black-haired yard dogs and two grey cats, with an old car in the garage that only starts with a push, and with a view of the Danube through the Latin, Greek and German crucifix, then, maybe, the monster in me would loosen its grip at least a bit.” She licked the glue and skilfully rolled the cigarette.

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“I’m not Hungarian”, Renata admits to us when we’ve already moved away from the camp. “At least not pure-blooded. But I found that out only recently. I did a DNA test of nationality and to my huge surprise it turns out that I’m more than fifty per cent Spanish”, she chuckled to herself and looked at us sideways again. Even though it was dark in the car, I felt her amused look over the shoulder.

“History books say that after Austria had lost the Spanish throne, the Habsburg supporters, mostly from Catalonia, fled to the Austro-Hungarian territory. From Vienna, Sicily and Apulia they were sent to Banat. Allegedly, they were dissatisfied because the Austro-Turkish wars had not yet ended and, instead of peace, they spent their exile in an area which, like Croatia two hundred years before their immigration, was called *Antemurale Christianitatis*. However, Vienna appeased them by making them all nobles, regardless of their status in the Spanish Kingdom. As if the title meant something to them in Banat!” she scoffed

out loud. “But maybe it did! If you have nothing else...” she paused for a moment, then added, “But it was of no use for them. They mostly died.”

Everyone looked out of their window at the darkness growing through the plain like a wave.

“Then, in 1734, the Spanish colony New Barcelona was founded in Banat, into which those who already were in Banat (the rare ones who survived), as well as those who, due the new wave of refugees from what is now in France, once again overwhelmed Vienna with their demands for accommodation, benefits and military pensions. I remember that when I was reading about it, it was said that a large number of the inhabitants of that Spanish colony were war veterans who married German or Hungarian women. The reasons for the collapse of the colony vary among different historians, some state that the colony collapsed on its own because it was continued by veterans and disabled soldiers, less capable of work and already weakened in the struggle against the Banat marshes, while others, whom I honestly believe more, claim that people were killed by mosquitos, plague, war and famine. Nevertheless,” she sneered contemptuously, “they all had noble status!” she laughed bitterly.

“I mean,” she raised her voice and made a dramatic pause in which we expected the continuation of her thought, “were these people whom we have just visited, sent on a mission as the Germans and Spaniards once were, to conquer the territory they want to consider their own, we cannot know. They didn’t know it either! My ancestors thought they were going to an utopian city called New Barcelona! Where a man throws two seeds and four stalks grow! Where they would be exempt from taxes because of their sacrifices for the Austrian Emperor, and not because they have yet to drain the swamp in order to be able to pay dues in the first place! Where they would be welcomed by an orderly society and an organised city, as if from blueprints and plans! and not prison to which they were sent because Vienna and Pest began to choke under the burden of refugees who were then, again as a ballast of the German principalities, sent to Banat as if to the gallows. They don’t know it either, and no one will know it for a long time.”

She fell silent, pressing her lips together and lowering her gaze, as if she were already forgiving everyone in advance, knowing that as long as the time is measured by periods of power, the victims are not only the ones who don't need anything.

“Finally, “she continued after a short pause during which we were also silent, “if you happen to be wondering ... Not even four years after the establishment of the New Barcelona colony, the colonists, driven away by the war, famine and plague, began to return to Vienna or Pest. Allegedly, only 64 Spaniards remained in Banat until the coronation of Maria Theresa.”

It was already night when we crossed the Croatian–Serbian border.

“I searched in the family genealogy for that Spaniard from whom I descended, but all the grandmothers and aunts remember only Hungarians; the patroness of my family probably was one of those women who married Spanish colonists for pensions and tax benefits. In vain, obviously”, she sneered. “It was not possible to survive in Banat even then. Nevertheless, I found only one clue: my surname in Spanish means ‘refugee’.”

MOUNA BEN HAJ ZEKRI

Mouna Ben Haj Zekri is an actress and director. She is a graduate of the Tunisian National Theatre Acting School. She holds a master's degree in cultural management and a BA in modern French literature. Bel Haj Zekri has co-written and acted in several plays, including her latest project, "The Blind Spot," "Madame M" and "On la refait refait" by Essia Jaibi, and "Fenêtres Sur..." by Raja Ben Ammar. She has also appeared in various independent films. Self-narrative and memory are at the heart of her creative process.

MOUNA BEN HAJ ZEKRI

LA DOLCE VITA

I have been having the same bad dream for days. Every night, for two weeks now. I wake up panting and sweating. I am suffocating and my size is that of a little boy who was left alone. The dream starts at dawn. The sun is coming up and I'm crossing a forest trying to reach the sea. The more I advance the further the shore recedes and the light that I could see on the side of the water fades away and the trees multiply and the forest becomes denser, and I'm trapped. At first, I thought I was alone. Then I started to feel somebody walking beside me or behind me, I could feel him hovering around me. I can't see clearly, it's getting dark. Then, suddenly, somebody pushes me from behind. I find myself in a candle-lit tunnel and I still can't see the person behind me pushing me forward and saying, "Keep going, do not look back". My body is so tense, that it aches. I cannot turn left or right. I can't see anything. The man shoves me so violently I find myself falling down a bottomless pit. That's when I woke up. My heart beats the drums, I look at the walls in my room. My brain is still dazed by the dream and I'm more terrified. I wake up with my whole body hurting: my belly, my throat, my heart. The pain continues for an hour and a half or two hours. To soothe the pain, I start smoking avidly one cigarette after the other. At 7:00 in the morning, I leave the bed. I have a cold shower. I get dressed and head to the Bardo station. I carry a sign with my phone number and the words "unclogging drains" with my orange jacket holding a cleaning wire. Usually, four or five of us wait there the entire day. Each day brings its bread.

Today I logged into Facebook and in the Memories, a picture from two years ago popped up. A picture of me and Mariam. I remember that day in detail. It was her birthday and she wanted us to spend the day

at La Goulette. She loves La Goulette. When she was still at high school, she used to skip classes, hop on a metro then a train and go to the beach by herself. She used to do that whenever something bothered her. Looking at the sea calmed her down. We took a big blanket, she made lemonade, breakfast, and lunch. God did we love that day. I sang *Amal Hayati* (an oldie by Um Kalthoum translated to My Life's Hope) to her. The coffee shop across was playing it. I used to feel that Mariam was the only woman to whom I could sing *Amal Hayati*. When the night fell, we lay down for half an hour looking at the sky. I almost felt like the beach was our beach and that we were the only people left in the world. I used to tell her about everything and so did she. It used to ease me to unload my heart. The words and stories that I would tell to her! God, I never thought I could tell them to anybody. I haven't had any news from her for two years now. I don't know where she is. She changed her number and blocked me on Facebook. I wonder if the picture came up on her newsfeed too.

Oh, it's 1:00 PM! The elegant woman is bound to pass by anytime now. I reckon she is coming out of the bank behind us. She works there. A banker. Her hair is ever so soft, and her fragrance makes me dizzy. She's always clicking her heels as if she were walking on clouds. She's wearing her red dress today. One, two, three, now she's going to turn around, smile, and say hi to me: "How are you today?". I don't know if she's over 40. She doesn't look old, but she looks like a woman.

The boys and I haven't been to the beach for over a month. The last time we went, it took a load off my heart. We sang our hearts out. We were scorched. I feel that the sun heals me. It cleanses me from the inside. When I dive into the water, I feel like I was reborn. I lose track of time and forget all my troubles with it. We were like kids poking fun at each other. You could hear our laughs and songs from far away. I dive and swim underwater until I'm out of breath and rush back up. I gulp for air, then dive again and swim away until I become invisible from the shore. It's just me and the sea and this voice inside of me telling me to leave. The alcohol level drops, I go back to the beach, and I drink some more. Adel hasn't come with us to the beach since the last *barga* (Tunisian word for illegal immigration which means to burn), he still doesn't want to tell us what happened exact-

ly. There's nothing I love more than a nap lulled by the sound of the waves. I feel like I'm back in my mother's womb where nothing can hurt me.

I came across a film once. It drove me mad. It's called *La Dolce Vita*. That's when I started dreaming about leaving. I could see myself living there. I started learning Italian and I became very fluent. But they asked for a lot of papers for the visa, and I don't have them. I began considering *Harga*" I've been collecting the money for years. Still not enough. My uncle is my only option. He should sell the piece of land and give me my share. I feel like he's hiding something from me. He's been beating around the bush for days. It could be because I've annoyed him. I keep calling him every couple of days. This feeling of being in between, my mind there and my body stuck here, it's tiring me out. My imagination runs wild. I dream about a life I'm not even sure of. I'm focusing all my effort on leaving. I can't accept my life here anymore. Why did Mariam go? Now that my mother and father passed, I have no reason to stay here. My roots dried up. They turned into dust scattered around by the wind.

Two days ago, I started screaming for absolutely no reason. I was sitting there when I started shouting so violently: I've had enough! I have had enough God please take me!". The boys were trying to comfort me. They were scared that the security guards of the parliament nearby would close in on us and arrest me. I shouted for half an hour nonstop then I just left. I'm always pretending to be fine. I laugh and make people around me laugh, I tell jokes, I smile. I'm patient as a rock and inside me, the fire rages on. I was silent for way too long and one day I burst. I can hear them gossiping about me and I hardly stop myself from bashing one of their faces in.

The *harreg* (the smuggler) called me. I called my uncle. He said to give him two days, he'll find a way. Every minute that passes gnaws at my bones. It's getting worse. I can hardly catch my breath. It's almost coming true. I'm tired of waiting on this pavement for a job that might come. I'm sick of the run down Bardo fountain with never any water coming out. I'm tired of this construction site that would never end, the train rails, the broken asphalt, the barbed wire around the parliament. My throat is filled with a roar striving to come out. And how about this dream that I made up in my head,

could it be true? What if I drown or reach the other side and get caught and brought back? My brain must be lying to me. My brain fabricated this story, and I believed it. But what do I have to lose? I should try. I have nothing to lose. It'll work, I'm sure it'll work. I am always up for a laugh and a good time and people take kindly to me, thank God. When I laugh, I have two dimples on my cheeks. The women there would have a crush on me. And I love singing. I have a voice that would make a stallion of a man break into sobs.

It's been 2 days. At 10:30 in the morning, my uncle calls me to drop by and get my money. I do. I burst into tears. "But nobody is forcing your son! Come and stay with us. Open a small store. Get married be happy and forget about this whole thing. You have no idea how it will end." I rushed out tripping and falling every two steps. I leaned against the wall and cried my eyes out. I've been alone for two years. Cooking alone, eating alone, sleeping alone, watching TV alone. The feeling of solitude devoured me raw. I'm not running from anything. I want to go to Rome and roam around until I'm tired.

At this point, I have no idea how my story will unfold. It can't be worse than what it is now. I feel like I've paid my dues with life. I'm done.

I'm crossing the forest, and the sea keeps getting further and further. Every step counts. I can barely make progress. I feel like the sand is sucking me down. I can see people overtaking me, and I'm slowly drifting behind, the last one in the line. I'm at the shore. The water is so dark you can't see the bottom. We get aboard a small boat, all crammed together. Everyone is holding onto their bag. I can no longer hear or see anything. My heart is beating so violently I can feel it tearing out of my chest. Next to me is a guy who's my age or maybe even younger. Smiling. Where did he get the courage? Why is he leaving? Where is he going? Is he dreaming of Italy, too? My bones start to hurt, I'm holding the bag too tight. The further we go the scarier the sea gets. The waves are violent and high. Every ebb and flow feel like a beating down. The sound of the waves is bleeding my ears. Like they're shrieking. Like glass is breaking. Like Thunder. I don't recognize it. "Leave it to God". *La Dolce Vita*. I can see Sylvia dancing in the middle of la Fontana di Trevi and calling me, prompting me to go to her. I reach her. She holds me. We are dancing with our feet planted in the water.

SAMIA AMAMI'S TEXT, SELECTED BY THE TUNISIAN NATIONAL THEATRE, REPRESENTS A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO THE DECONFINING PROJECT, AS IT ENRICHES OUR UNDERSTANDING OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF THE WORLD DETERMINED BY OUR INTERNAL, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL CONFINEMENTS.

SAMIA AMAMI

Samia Amami is a Tunisian Dramaturg and screenwriter. She wrote multiple texts for the stage including *Illegitimate*, *Hydrogen*, and *Forbidden Zone*. She is known as a TV screenwriter for her work on *Night's Stars*, *Police*, and *The Afternoon Spirits*. She is currently writing for theatre, TV, and cinema and is committed to sharing her experience through training sessions in dramatic writing. She is considered as one of the most important dramatists in Tunisia and her writing is distinguished due to her innovative style and her commitment to social causes in their human and universal dimensions.

SAMIA AMAMI

THE INCREDIBLE
STORY OF BAOO
THE FOULANI AND
THE BIG FISH

“Air pillow, water, wide, far, the high star. line, tomorrow, youngsters, adults, children, how many? A mother singing, embraced, coincidence, the blue carpet, strong movement, under, roaring. The mountains of water emerged, surrounding, vertigo. Grabbing the horse reins, saw the mountain out devouring people, time was rushing, screaming, crying silence nobody. Hands only roots, if only I could swim as I can ride, the old man, disappear.

Pressure underneath, water, ocean, in eyes, ears, mouth, all, vertigo, big fish. Darkness, water, hot, scorching, mother’s belly, mom, the trap, dark, the air, very dark, time lost a lot. He looks, ants devouring my skin, spitting out, big fish. Beach people’s eyes.”

I stopped translating, so Giacomo stopped the recording and looked at me wondering.

“I’m not sure”, I answered.

“This is a literal translation of the immigrant’s words but I’m not sure I understand all of the vocabulary of his language. Does he mean that a fish swallowed him and then spat him out on the shore or is it just a metaphor?

That's what the translator who brought him in for investigation said as you can hear in the recording. He confirmed to us that to the immigrant speaks the Fulani language, but he couldn't make out the dialect. This is why I called you. You're the only real expert in Fulani and you master its different dialects which could allow you to locate the region from which he came."

That's true. I could have. But it was a dialect I had never heard before. The Fulani language contains multiple dialects and I'm fluent in most. Some of them share a lot of vocabulary but grammar and structure differ. This language is strange, for example he says the "line of tomorrow", does he mean the horizon where the sun comes up? When he says "star" does he mean the moon or the sun? The accident of the boat that brought him in with the other immigrants capsized, did that occur at night or in the daytime? And this big fish he mentions, is it a fish or a boat in whose "belly" or "bottom" he spent some time? And this burning liquid he mentions, does he mean the stomach secretion of the fish or the oil from the boat engine which burned his skin, and what does he even mean by the mountains that emerged in the water?

I continued to expose all the hypotheses that could help translate the Fulani immigrant's words till Giacomo kept peering at the large piece of paper in front of him, spread out like a chess board, switching his gaze back and forth between the computer in front of him and the lines and empty squares on the paper like he was desperately trying to benefit from my explanation of the linguistic intricacies of Fulani and Swahili, which seemed useless to him.

"Has he mentioned the country from which he came?", I asked, unprepared for his disproportionate reaction to the situation.

"Would you be here if he did? It's been three weeks since he was picked up between life and death on the Mondello beach. Everyone questioned him. The female immigrants waiting here to be deported talked to him, to no avail. He says that he comes from the land of the Great Spring, nobody knows where this land is. And he keeps rambling about this big fish,

the fish that swallowed him. He was kept under supervision in the hospital after he was caught at the beach. The doctor's report is quite clear and does not indicate any mental illness that could explain this strange story that he came up with. Nothing in his account makes sense, no country of origin, no country of crossing, no track record of his journey, no identities for those who were with him on the boat, not even a sign of the boat itself. Nothing that I could use to write this report.”

I listened to Giacomo as he poured his heart out, the words pushing out of his lips and his voice choking as if it were a personal matter. He didn't use to be like this. I'd known Giacomo for two years. I had met him for the first time in one of the camps in central Africa. I was invited to interpret for a diplomatic mediation meeting to ease the tension between two rivaling tribes. He was working with Doctors Without Borders. I used to watch him treat the wounded, comfort the women and the mothers, and feed the babies under the shelling of rifles and bombs, with a friendly smile that never left his freckled face, tanned by the African sun which he loved dearly. I remember when I saw him once at the end of an exhausting day of work playing with the children who kept climbing his shoulders and riding him laughing, as he spun them around imitating a neighing agitated horse, my heart overflowed with tenderness. I thought I had fallen in love with him. Youth. A lot of time has passed since our last meeting. We got acquainted with death, misery, and hell, then life took us our separate ways. When he called me two days ago, I had just ended my contract with the organization where I worked as a translator. So, I did not hesitate to come. “It's one-day job”, he told me. “You come to Mondello early in the morning and you get on a plane back to Paris by the end of the day “. I did not expect to find him this stressed. He must be used to such shenanigans. Immigrants hiding the truth, pretending they have amnesia, or fabricating events they heard in their countries or villages, so they do not get deported back to the hell they fled. A lot has changed since I started working with organizations as a translator for immigrants. The instructions have become very strict and this humanitarian system which the western world boasts as its pride and emblem of civilization has become a heavy legacy which embarrasses the countries of the North. Politicians come up with such polished discourses, but the bottom line is the same: we do not want you. The

instructions are clear: the largest possible number of immigrants must be returned to their countries of origin. Yes, it is quite pointless to ask further. “I understand you very well”, that’s all I said, then added: “How can I help you, Giacomo? Because honestly, I can’t see what I can do more than my previous colleague did.”

His face softened and his voice wasn’t as harsh anymore, “There is no sign of a boat leaving the coasts of Libya or Tunisia. The coastal authorities have not received the Mayday signal from any boat for over four weeks. No bodies have washed ashore. There is no trace of the journey he is talking about, nor has any of the immigrants with him on the boat been identified. The journey he keeps going on about is a ghost. He could not have spent a week in the belly of the whale as he claims. It would have digested him bones included, and pushed him out as a sea fertilizer.” Giacomo laughed, repeating his last words, as he realized that, inadvertently, he was trapped in the immigrant’s story.

Suddenly, a strong smell invaded the place.

Face down, I was watching the saliva bubbles coming out of my mouth and landing at the bottom of the toilet. Something in my body is trying to turn it inside out like a sock. I could hear the cleaning lady standing behind me holding a roll of toilet paper and waiting for me to finish my vomiting party, rambling in broken French.

“It’s so weird. The centre provides food, yet they insist on cooking on their own. They use the same ingredients, the same spices, but their food has a distinctive strong smell that turns your stomach. Even the neighbours are complaining.”

When the vomit storm receded in my belly and my digestive system resettled at last, I lifted my head and looked at her face. Slightly dark-skinned, with blond hair spreading out like a field of ripe wheat after a strong wind storm, over dark roots of curly hair which looks like she belongs to the African continent.

She handed me the toilet paper and added: "Is it true that there is a wizard in here?".

I wiped my mouth and my face peered at her for a while then answered, "it is the smell from the concentrated detergent that you use." I shut the door in her face and saw silly writings and drawings dug into the wooden toilet door, a testament to all the detainees that went through there. I archived the writings by snapping a photo with my phone camera, she continued to talk through the closed door about the sanitary protocol, the cats that disappear suddenly, and all the weird things that happen in the centre. Her voice started getting further as she rambled on in Italian mixed with Tunisian swear words that she thought I could not understand. I laughed. I often find myself in similar situations. There are so many stories I heard from people who could never have guessed that behind my blonde hair, blue eyes, and delicate nose lied the most authentic Tunisian origins.

Giacomo's face was relieved when I told him about the solution I came up with in the restroom. "I'm going to try to decipher the symbols of the language spoken by the Fulani. It's not impossible but I need all the recordings of his questioning as well as a private session with him to observe the internal pattern of his dialect. This will lead us to the original version of his story in addition to precise information about him and his journey. I need to photocopy a great deal of sketches which will take six to eight hours of work. This means I have to spend an extra day here."

Giacomo promised to provide everything that I needed and to add the extra hours to my remunerative cheque in addition to accommodation in a beautiful hotel overlooking the beach.

The noise of the children and the vacationers playing at the pool merged with the Fulani immigrant's voice which extended like an open field. The software I was working on to decipher the strange language needed time but there I was, sitting in the bathroom looking at the pregnancy test. It was the third test since my periods stopped. I don't know what I was expecting by retaking it. Each time I hoped I wouldn't see this pink line announcing the dangerous swerve my life was about to take. I hadn't told anybody, yet, not even René my husband.

He is such a sweet man, and I am so lucky to have him. All through the years we've been married he's never asked me straightforwardly but lately he's been hinting at it more and more. He was delighted when I told him that I was putting an end to my international work, that I was settling in Paris to teach and write, and that I was actually considering having a baby that could make him a father and could make us a family.

He left a thumb as a reaction to my message telling him that I'm staying in Mondello another night. He's not happy about it. Usually, he leaves a heart on all my messages. I typed a line breaking the news him then deleted it. I'm going to surprise him when I get back or maybe not, maybe I'm just stalling as usual, I need time to think. Bringing a child to this world is a terrifying decision.

Why did I accept this room overlooking the pool? I closed the window and the children's noise disappeared.

The Fulani's voice invaded the room.

A voice flat as an open field. An accent that ended with some tension. A tone quite different from the usual rounded tone of Sub-Saharan Africans. He is from Eastern Africa, perhaps. Somalia? Ethiopia? Eritria? There were no isolated groups speaking a specific version of Fulani in these countries as far as I knew.

There is a beautiful old house in front of the centre gate. A huge steel door and no sign, only a weird drawing.

I hung up the sketches and prepared for the work session. All that could help me decipher the symbols of this smartass's language. He opened the door and here he is standing in front of me. A tall heavy-built body under ample summer clothes. He had bandages on his arms and white scars of deep burns under his dark black skin. A Typical Fulani face, a small head and delicate features which do not match a pair of bulging eyes that seemed to want to devour the world.

I greeted him and introduced myself. He just nodded.

Giacomo switched on the recorder and left us alone. I asked him to examine the pictures and tell me the names of the things that he was looking at. Boat: “bawdi”, he answered me without thinking. Interestingly, I took down the remark in a notebook and the word in the software and continued. Sun: “birdi?” “No! star–birdi” he insisted. Alright, star: “hala”, water: “mayo” which means a spring in Fulani, massina: “liquid”, mist: “jabird”. This is a strange language, indeed. It shares the roots of the Fulani language and centres on an impressionist description of things, like a primitive isolated language, words with multiple significations dependent upon the corresponding gesture or tone of voice. Simple grammar and short sentences. Most of the words are sense–based, impressionist, non–abstract words. The biggest discovery of all, is that it is a completely neutral language, no gender for nouns, verbs, or pronouns. “ow” for both male and female, “om” for the plural.

I almost clapped at the discovery. I became more excited to decipher this rare language. I did not feel the time passed with the Fulani immigrant. I looked at the watch, almost five hours passed. I apologized. He did not care and remained ready for the next picture. His eyes have a peculiar sparkle heightened by the bulging, like he is feeding off the words he is uttering, like a little boy who is gleeful to share his game. I smiled gently and continued. He stopped when I reached the picture of a whale: “nagabu–godi”. He pressed his lips when I told him, in his language, that we were taking a break before continuing.

I declined Giacomo’s invitation to lunch gently, I can’t keep anything down, and I did not feel like another puking party. I told him we could question him after the break. I sat in the kitchen watching him eat with the cleaning lady, while the final touches in the deportation of the only three immigrants left were underway. It was Allocò, which I enjoyed. Had it not been for the circus in my belly I would have eaten. I rejected the offer politely and I stuck to water and to the nutritional supplements which I could no longer go without.

I saw the eldest one, she was over sixty. She was making a plate for the Fulani. The youngest one received it with awe and reverence, and she reminded her to bless them and the food.

“The story has become widespread in the centre here and other centres in the island. Everyone is talking about the Fulani and the big fish. It explains the strange disappearance of some illegal trips in the middle of the sea. Some say it is a curse and that the sea is angry with Man, it unleashed big fish to feed off the fruits of the earth in ruthless hunting parties, they believe that’s what explains the decline in the number of illegal migrations from the South of the Mediterranean.”

I laughed with Giacomo as he told me the developments of the story on our way to the office, to resume work. He noticed how puzzled I was with the women’s behaviour, and I did not try to hide my astonishment. Myth always serves the interests of the powerful. The weak transmit it, believe in it, and give it the necessary power to make it their truth. It conditions their lives, dictates their actions, and sets the boundaries that the powerful wish to draw.

“On the river bank, there is a small village, ten huts in addition to ours. Cattle of a hundred, cows, goats, three dogs, and a horse that I ride. It is called the Great Spring. The school is in the old man’s hut. We teach cow veterinary medicine and calculus. I don’t read White Man’s language. Imbay does. He reads the newspapers and tells us everything. He said that the king promised—...”

“So, it is a monarchy?”, Giacomo asked.

“He is talking about the king of the Fulani people; it is an honorary tribal title. His mission is to resolve conflicts between the various Fulani groups and to mediate between his people and other governments.”, I explained to Giacomo.

“Ask him if the king lives in their village.”

“I don’t know” The Fulani answered, “It takes a two–week trip to meet him. My father wanted to see him with some people from the village but my grandmother forbade it. She told him we don’t need a king to protect us.”

“What did the king promise you?”

“He wouldn’t attack Aliat the tenants of the Great Spring, Imbay said that Aliat were very angry, they wanted us to leave. They attacked the village before sunrise, they set fire to the huts and killed a lot of people, everyone I know.”

“–How did you survive?” I translated Giacomo’s question.

“I left in the dead of night but my parents refused to. My father started speaking the villagers’ language fluently, he spoke like them and believed their lies rather than his ancestors, that’s what my grandmother told me and she pushed me to leave.”

“Whose lies do you mean? The kings?”, I commented.

“I don’t know the king, I know Imbay. He said they would not attack us. My father was right. Imbay died, as well as my father, mother, siblings, and grandmother.”

“How did you know that they were going to attack you?”

“I saw it in a dream. My forefathers asked me to tell everyone to leave. Ancestors do not lie.”

Giacomo mumbled and lifted his eyebrows resentfully. He did not believe the Fulani’s tale.

“What is the significance of dreaming about your forefathers?”, I asked

“I am ‘Pao’.”

“The chosen one”, I explained to Giacomo.

“Pao is the name we have in our records, what is your real name?”

“have no right to say it. Our ancestors do not have names and when I die I will join them. That’s what my grandmother explained me when I told her that my forefathers visited me in a dream. They oiled my hair. That day I cooked and fed the entire village.”

“You said that you left on the night of the attack. How did you find out that everyone else died?”

“Death news has wings, they can find you wherever you are.”

“Where were you when you received the news of the attack and of your family’s death and from whom” Giacomo asked trying to trick him.

“A big town. I reached it after two days of walking.”

“The name?!”

He stopped and fixed his bulging eyes on me. I shook with awe for a minute. “I don’t know, it does not matter”, he answered briefly and went on describing his journey which lasted four years. It started with the Fulanis who crossed the desert with him, then the masked men who sold him in Libya where he was imprisoned and forced into labour. Then, how he managed to flee to Tunisia with three others. How he was helped with a job in an olive farm in the South of Tunisia until he put together the money for the trip. He continued describing the crossing, the incident, and the whale which ate him and in whose belly he spent some days until it spat him out on the shore.

Giacomo's freckled face turned red with anger and he stopped the recording. "This is a joke", he said in a choked voice. "He comes from the village of the Great Spring, by the river which no one has ever heard of. He doesn't read or write, he doesn't know in which country it is, nor the neighbouring countries where he took refuge, nor the names of the masked men, or the farm owner in the South of Tunisia, or the name of the boat owner who arranged his trip. All these paid hours you spent deciphering this strange language have been useless. "

I was infected with the rage and asked him to lower his voice, then rushed outside. I asked the cleaning lady for a cigarette. I should not smoke. I lit it. My head is about to burst. "The directions are clear Sarah", Giacomo followed me saying. "The refugee status will not be given to anyone whose story sounds fabricated, let alone this man who is claiming he is a prophet and that he can live inside a whale for days. What am I supposed to tell the government representative coming to finalize the procedure for shutting down the centre? The directions are very straightforward. The government signed agreements with several African states to return immigrants. The overall number of migrants who will be transferred from this centre to refugee centres must drop to zero or below. Zero or below!"

He continued to talk to me about directions, agreements, and stakes in a condescending tone as if I were one of his employees. Suddenly, I realized that, due to empathizing with an old friend, I was getting myself caught in a similar situation to those that made me hate my work with Humanitarian organizations to begin with. I used to try to remain neutral, to stick to translation and steer away from thinking about all these details, all these questions and words devoid of meaning. The hotel I am staying in, where the fee for one night could feed an African family for a year. The exorbitant pay for an hour's work. Such large amounts of money are being squandered on fighting poverty, hunger, terrorism, and wars, while evil is still king of the world. I vomited all the words I had repressed in his face. No. All the nausea was not pregnancy-induced. It was disgust. Disgust down to the tiniest cell in my body, with this world we constructed and which I helped making for a while.

“You are delusional if you think you can press me like this. I won’t, no matter how close we are. Even though I technically quit work, I am still a sworn interpreter and I will not help you invent information to bring back this wretched man to the hell he fled.”

“Sarah, who asked you to lie? On the contrary, you are the only one who can speak to him. All I am suggesting is to bend the questioning protocol a little and to put some pressure on him in order to reveal his lies and to get down to the real version of events.”

“Of course, the version that works for you and your bosses.”

“Sarah, you need to help me.” He grabbed my wrist with force and his face darkened all of a sudden. “Do not be fooled by the beaches and the light nice atmosphere here in Mondello. The crisis is exacerbating here. The inhabitants are forming committees to defend their style of living. They are talking and condemning the conspiracy of big change. Everyone working with Humanitarian organizations and immigration and refugee institutions is considered an enemy of the people. We are accused of treason. We are stealing bread from the locals to feed strangers. Extremist groups are threatening migrants and promising them a worse hell than what they left behind. I thought by asking to be transferred here that I would be far from pressure but the agitation followed me all the way here. I can hear the sirens of alarm warning against an imminent explosion. Sarah”— he pronounced my name in a soft and ambiguous voice, “I am scared for my life.”

I peered at his face for a while and struggled to contain my vomit. I took a deep breath and stomped my cigarette. I pulled my wrist out of his hand. “I am going to change my flight. You will get my report tomorrow morning before I leave and you don’t need to drop me at the hotel.”

I was surprised to find Pao the Fulani sitting calmly in his chair at the office. I was so angry that I forgot about him. I apologized and informed him that I had finished my work with him while gathering my things. He kept staring at me with his bulging eyes which moved anxiously, like he was trying to tell me something.

I waited for a bit. He did not say anything. I left.

I crossed the yard to the centre gate. The cleaning lady was talking to the three female immigrants and sharing their food. I went down the road to the beach where the hotel was. I don't know how I managed to get to my room, drowning in my rage. I slid into the warm bathroom water. I took a deep breath to clear my head. Suddenly, questions rose to my mind like the soap bubbles on the water's surface.

Why does Pao insist on this whale story? His account lacks a lot of details to specify the dates, itineraries, country names and people he met. But overall, it is a coherent story. Why does he insist on the whale thing, which takes from his credibility? Even if this did happen to him, which is impossible, he could have overlooked this detail. If he is lying and making up this whole thing, why doesn't he mention real names, places, and dates? Does he not know them? Do names mean nothing to him? Could he be a prophet? My brain continued to boil with absurd questions that had no answers. The water became too hot, and I jumped out, leaving a small puddle behind me.

I turned on the laptop and typed some keywords. An attack on a Fulani village. The Great Spring. Struggle for water. Four years ago. 2015. Results are popping out in front of my eyes. A massacre in the north of Mali. Where exactly? Most of the articles do not mention the names of the villages. North of Mali, near the Niger River. Where? Maybe it is an African thing, names do not matter. Some sources are in French. Same thing. Here it is! January 2015. The Yirgou massacre. About 200 Fulanis were killed by the Kogleweogo militia. April 2015, here it is! April 2015, an attack on Arbinda in Soum, Burkina Faso. 160 people, mostly Fulani villagers, were killed by anonymous armed men. The attack happened at 5 am, gunmen on motor-cycles set the homes and storehouses on fire and shot the inhabitants. The events match Pao's account. Most massacres look the same, but why not? How old was he then? 16, 17? To have your entire family murdered after you warned them, to have your grandmother push you to flee, and then to suffer for four years, is quite a trauma. Is there any way he is a prophet?

1 The dates mentioned are fictional. They are based on true events but need historical verification.

Giacomo was neither happy nor angry to read my report, with all the discoveries I spent the night fact-checking. “There is no established agreement with Burkina Faso for the return of immigrants”, I said to him in a subtly triumphant tone. ¹

“I will finish filling in the form and then he will be moved with the women to the refugee centre inland. Now, he is some other employee’s business. Thank you so much, Sarah”. Then he invited me for a drink while waiting for the plane.

“I would have loved to but I am pregnant,” I said for the first time. He was surprised when I told him I wanted to meet Pao the Fulani again. He did not understand my request and neither did I. Had I lost the neutrality I spent years training for and sympathized with him, or was my curiosity still pricked by his provocative story?

“Younes or Jonas?” I threw the question at him so suddenly that he was confused, in the hope of finding an answer or an involuntary expression that could solve this puzzle. He remained calm with the same friendly smile from when he saw me when he first walked into the office, where Giacomo left me to run some other errands.

“The whale story, where did you read it? The Bible or the Quran? Younes or Jonas?”

“I know neither!” , he answered me calmly. I explained they were two names for the same prophet, the former by the Muslims and the latter by the Christians and I told him that in both versions, Younes or Jonas was drowned by God who then sent the whale to save him and to teach him a lesson because he had left his family without permission.

“I don’t know your God. I saw people on the boat lifting their arms to the sky when we were surrounded by whales but he did not come. Perhaps he is dead.

Are you familiar with Nietzsche?

You keep mentioning weird names. In my tribe, we do not read books. My grandmother told me we used to take to the road every time angry book people caught up with us. We don't need a king, nor books. Our life is simple. Rain falls, it fills the spring which waters the plants. The cows eat it and we drink their milk and thank the sky, and the bright star, and the trees. We fall in love, we get married, and we bring children into the world. They learn calculus, the names of things, and medicine. We used to choose an isolated spot every time we reached a new village. My grandmother would cook and invite everyone to eat. She used to shout: we're not here to fight your religion nor to build our edifices to compete with your churches and mosques, we are only crossing by. Our cows won't ruin your plantations. We won't sell them. We drink their milk, eat their meat and give thanks. We'll be your friends, we'll rejoice at your happiness and share your grief, and then we will go our way. Grandmother would wait, only after people had eaten would she give a name to the place and build huts.

Did they use it to understand what she said?

I don't know, it seemed like it. They were words we picked up as flowers amidst our journeying. We only take what we need. Too many words create sad thoughts and anger.

We have figured out whence you came, maybe, but you have not told us where you are heading. Why did you cross through here?"

He pulled out a photo wrapped in plastic, the photo of an African man standing in what looks like a forest. Behind him, there is a flowing spring.

"Khuman, the cousin of my friend who drowned. He sent it to him from a village here in the North. He says it is nobody's land. It has a flowing spring that is never scarce and very few people who are just like us, live in wood huts, they share the land with livestock and strangers, and they fight boredom with kindness. My grandmother visited me in a dream and

bid me to go there. She asked me to be kind, to smile, and not to get angry, she promised me that others would follow. My grandmother does not lie.”

I flipped the photo around, there was no number or address on it. I took a picture of it with my mobile. I Google lensed it and there were many suggestions. It could be Roya, a border zone between France and Italy. It could be in Switzerland. The old continent has many such places. Large extended fields, mountains, and forests with springs and greenery. So many migrants hailing from wastelands would find their happiness in this place. I imagined the journey of the very first man from Africa, and here he is standing in front of me, after he crossed the paths of death fleeing poverty and suffering, retracing the path of his ancestors to the North. I imagined him in that place in the photo, I imagined his great-grandkids in a thousand years. Why are so many people desperately resisting this?

It is a mad and absurd idea. No one can resist the natural flow of evolution.

I peered at him with a curious smile.

“It doesn’t matter that you don’t believe my story with the whale. All that matters is that you are kind.”

I don’t know why my eyes watered all of a sudden. Before I crossed the doorway rushing out, I was halted by his words: “It is going to be a daughter.”

I froze, I did not turn around for a while. I left.

“That is the story of the way I witnessed it and experienced it. Perhaps I was too near-sighted to grasp the whole truth of it, perhaps the pregnancy hormones impacted my understanding and assessment of some things, but everything I have said is documented and archived in a report with vocal recordings. Even though I had stopped working, I was still a sworn translator and I was never an accomplice in what Pao the Fulani —

or Ziad as you're calling him – did. I never helped him beguile immigration authorities as my old friend Giacomo keeps accusing me every time the subject is brought up with friends and acquaintances we have in common. I discovered the truth like any other person.

Three years went by. I was home. René my husband was playing with our little daughter who was organizing a tea party with her favourite doll. He was implicated in her little calm world. Yes, I did give birth to a girl and for a while, I thought that perhaps I had met a prophet, until one day I turned the TV on to watch my favourite cultural show. They had invited me as a guest before when my first book on linguistics came out. I could not believe my eyes and ears when I saw him. It was him, with his black skin and his bulging eyes that wanted to devour the world. He was responding with his usual smile which I knew so well to the presenter's introduction of him as Zied Shushan, the autodidactic Tunisian poet and writer. I was shouting "no no no" to my husband's surprise, listening to him speak in perfect French about how he reconstructed the story of his supposed ancestors, how they reached the south of Tunisia and how he imagined the primitive language they spoke at the village of the Great Spring on the banks of the Niger river, in a border zone between Mali and Burkina Faso. How he used his imagination to continue the itinerary of Pao, his protagonist until he reached Roya in the Italian–French border, where he wrote his book after working in agriculture there.

I kept laughing hysterically surprising both my daughter and my husband and all I said was, "This man is a genius. He is a genius."

Pao overcame all borders. He understood the absurdity of the system and he got us implicated in his story, trying to fill in the gaps with dates and events. The Fulani did not mention how he crossed the sea. It does not matter. All we know is that he did not cross inside a whale, as he claimed, he crossed through language and words.

THE NEXT GENERATION: LITHUANIA, BURKINA FASO AND BURUNDI

National Kaunas Drama Theatre, in cooperation with the theatre festival Les Recreatrales from Burkina Faso, selected 4 young talented writers of the next generation: Kibsa Anthony Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso) Laura Sheilla Inangoma (Burundi), Greta Ambrazaitė–Norkūnė (Lithuania) and Teodora Marija Grigaitė (Lithuania), who for three months, through discussions, mind maps, lectures, and workshops, matured their texts about the pandemic and post-pandemic experiences in their countries, and at the same time about the external and internal constraints of the contemporary world and the utopias of liberation, searching for common images, keywords, and narratives, for the shared dreams of their generation that would stretch across the continents of Europe and Africa. The authors took part in 7 online workshops, which were led by:

Associate professor Edgaras Klivis, artistic director of the National Kaunas Drama Theatre, head of Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, associate professor of the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, Vytautas Magnus University; Dr. Egidius Kamanyi, Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Dar es Salaam; Dr. Karina Simonson, a professional art historian, whose Areas of Research are: Africa and Asia connections, South African Jewish history and culture, representations of Africa in Lithuanian culture, African diaspora in Eastern Europe, cultural links between Baltic and African countries during the Cold War, postcolonialism, race and racism, cultural appropriations; Dr. Viktoras Bachmetjevas, Doctor of Sciences, Associate Professor in Philosophy, Vytautas Magnus University.

TEODORA GRIGAITĖ, LAURA SHEILLA
INANGOMA, GRETA AMBRAZAITĖ,
AND KIBSA ANTHONY OUEDRAOGO,
PARTICIPATED IN THE FIRST
DECONFINING WRITERS' RESIDENCY,
A THREE-MONTH ONLINE PROGRAM.
THROUGH DEBATES, MIND MAPS,
LECTURES, AND WORKSHOPS, THEY
EXPLORED COMMON THEMES, KEYWORDS,
AND NARRATIVES THAT TRANSCEND
CONTINENTS. THEIR COLLABORATIVE
EFFORTS LED TO THE CREATION OF
LITERARY TEXTS AND DESCRIBING
PERSONAL PANDEMIC EXPERIENCES.

TEODORA MARIJA GRIGAITĖ

Teodora Marija Grigaitė is a PhD student at the Lithuanian Institute for Cultural Research, a philosopher, translator, publisher, and educator. At 'Phi Knygos', she worked on texts ranging from ancient philosophy to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. She also writes philosophical books for children. Her international publication on the role of laughter and humour in the feminist movement is forthcoming.

TEODORA MARIJA GRIGAITĖ

DECONFINEMENT

PRESENTATION OF THE IDEA

This *DECONFINEMENT* Project is part one of four and consists of two stories. The conceptual axis of the first story is the mystical experience and *Gelassenheit* (releasement, detachment, stoic repose), and the second one is the Sartrean¹ concept of “bad faith”, indicating how a

¹ The existentialist, phenomenological system of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.

person behaves under the influence of bad motives (the adjective “bad” in this case does not refer to a certain moral judgement, but to existential and ontological inauthenticity. Bad faith is when a person acts guided by principles that

have nothing to do with his/her dispositions and wishes, but rather according to the expectations of others (individuals, society, religious and cultural tropes). Both concepts are considered in connection with different spaces and the phenomenon of boredom. The first and second parts operate on the principle of contrast (both in terms of space and contemplated concepts).

The first story, which depicts a mystical experience and *Gelassenheit*, interlaces these concepts into a narrative where the main character is an abandoned flat in the Kaunas district filled with Soviet-era buildings. The story unfolds the amplitude of an individual’s relationship

² Huxley, Aldous. *The Doors of Perception. Heaven and Hell*. Vilnius: Kitos Knygos. 2019. ISBN9786094273667

with space and depicts how interpersonal, inter-objective communication depends on changing states of consciousness. The idea of painting the environment as the protagonist of the story comes from Aldous Huxley’s essay *The Doors of*

*Perception. Heaven and Hell*² that explores modes of penetration into space. The protagonist of Huxley’s essay becomes a guinea pig and, for the sake of creativity, ingests a large number of psychedelic drugs. This action

resulted in the story of the entire essay, which is nothing more than a description of the environment surrounding the lyrical self.

In both parts, a lot of attention will be paid to the environment and space, however, the motivation for the (consciousness) change in this case will not be psychotropic substances, but the previously unexperienced feeling (emptying of consciousness) caused by the mandatory quarantine instructions. Therefore, the first part considers the following questions: What is our relationship with space? Can dedication to space influence the perceived releasement? Why is spatial liberation usually perceived quantitatively, and not qualitatively (i.e. why is the view that freedom means travelling to other lands, experiencing other cultures, and not a changing state of consciousness so rooted in popular culture and the new age spirituality tradition?). The first part is divided into three components: (i) consideration of the mystical experience as such; (ii) a brief introduction to the concept of *Gelassenheit*; (iii) a story in which the mystical experience and *Gelassenheit* appear in different guises.

The second part, with bad faith experience at its centre, talks about the 21st century's common image, illustrating how a person associates freedom with a certain exotic space, which, by the principle of connotations, embodies various practices of the new age spiritual life. The protagonists, engaged in digital nomadism³, spent their quarantine on one of the most picturesque islands in the world. There, after securing financial well-being, they spent several months on the island and practised all possible manifestations of the new age (Western) spiritual life. The story asks: Why is this example a good illustration of bad faith? Why does nature or culture, which are valued by everyone, worn out by aesthetic look, ultimately no longer connotes anything and does not existentially fill the chest?

Both parts are intended to critically contemplate what we consider liberation from the consequences of the pandemic that has been shaking the world for several years and to rhetorically ask why the basic impulses to escape from the usual space do not meet expectations and disappoint the individual existentially, psychologically, and ontologically even more.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_nomad

PART ONE

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE (CONCEPT CONSIDERATION)

In the history of philosophical thought, it has been stated for a very long time that one will not understand the world by reason and rationality alone. Some go even further and postulate that such movements as the emergence of modern philosophy or the much-glorified Age of Enlightenment have told us nothing about the world and experience of living. Well, unless the world can be measured, and it is a totality of transformations and events measured according to certain laws, theories, and equations. Rationality will save the world; rationality will solve individual and collective human problems. Logically understood reality, based on various natural or exact sciences, can tell exactly why we cry, why we experience ecstasy, why we gather in communities, and why we help the Other.

However, in addition to measurability and calculability, small experiences, which are quite difficult to penetrate, squeeze themselves in as well. And it seems that something is still missing, that the heart is aching from the fact that the answer to everything that seems magical and inexplicable is “it’s just your brain chemistry”, “it’s because the ozone layer combines with potassium oxide and nitrogen dust”; “because you drank too much poppy seed milk” ...

In this *clear* world, it is not clear what the voice of mysticism and mystical experience is. First of all, what is mysticism? What do we associate this term with? Are mysticism and mystical experience attributed only to the area of religion or spiritual matters? It seems that only Mary Magdalene, Meister Eckhart, some individual living on Bouvet Island, or a shaman can tell us something about exceptional sensations. It seems that the mystical feeling is associated with experiences that are incomprehensible to the Western mind, which are usually associated with

people who we orientalise and wrap up in various myths, and see not as the same people as us, but as those capable of experiencing, well, something more interesting.

According to the sources, mysticism is defined as a discipline or a worldview, which is based on unexplained phenomena, emotions, and intuition, however, it seems that today this experience is equated with new age spiritual practices, usually adapted for enrichment and a specific class of people. An ordinary person does not seem to have the right conditions for it. The conditions are related to the inner state, because after everything is explained, after examining not only the structure of the rocks, but also the state of the soul, and the effect, mysticism does not fit into the smoothness of the thought of the 21st century. However, perhaps the collectively felt “normality” as an emotion, or rather a cognitive/spiritual disposition, is just a response to a reality that seeks to negate otherness, something more magical than the reality of work–food–obligations–one week a year trip to Tenerife–new iPhone.

Oh, let us get back to normal sooner!

Probably both heard and acted upon phrase.

After the pandemic passed, normalcy receded. The notion that the world will stop if we do not get up five days out of seven to sell electric motors or file accounting reports has receded. The obligation or, rather, the inevitability of filling the consciousness with all possible content – work, studies, relationships, finances, career – abandoned us as well. Time seemed to have stopped. Not for everyone, of course. For those who risk their lives, time passes by too fast and too chaotically.

As for the rest, for those who collectively confined themselves, everything became *postponed*. The thoughts too have been postponed. Consciousness became blank. After all, what are we if for the most part not those obligations or small, fleeting pleasures? Some of us more, some less. Therefore, emptying the consciousness made more room for other experiences.

GELASSENHEIT (CONCEPT CONSIDERATION)

What should we do with this empty feeling? Of course, the first reaction is boredom and apathy. It seems that if we do not have obligations or do not artificially create new ones, the absence of rustle and noise becomes perplexing. We got used to having a dozen websites operating in our consciousness, and now, once x has been pressed on the entire browser, the ringing of silence is deafening. There is no doubt that experiencing silence is a privilege. This means that basic needs – sleep, food, and shelter – are ensured. Dealing with existential matters, no matter how much stress it causes to the subject, does not equate with not knowing whether you will be able to pay the rent next month. This dead time, according to the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, is also presented in the form of the concept of *Gelassenheit*:

Dead time – moments of withdrawal, of what old mystics called *Gelassenheit*, releasement – are crucial for the revitalisation of our life experience. And, perhaps, one can hope that one of the unintended consequences of the coronavirus quarantines in Chinese cities will be that some people at least will use their dead time to be released from hectic activity and think about the (non)sense of their predicament.⁴

⁴ Slavoj Žižek. My Dream of Wuhan. 2020. <https://literaturairmenas.lt/publicistika/slavoj-zizek-mano-uhano-svajones>

Gelassenheit, releasement, has several meanings. First of all, some have a rather rudimentary understanding of the concept, (i) *Gelassenheit* is relaxation. It is a situational event, which, however, can quickly change into a radically different state, such as anxiety, fear, alertness...; (ii) *Gelassenheit* is a calm state of consciousness. We are simply calm, and content, while strong emotions do not disturb the psyche; (iii) *Gelassenheit* – a stoic repose; (iv) *Gelassenheit* – the state of mind when separation and release are achieved, in other words – *unio mystica*.

Contemplating the latter concept and its unfolding in isolation and specific space, we define almost all the meanings represent-

ed by the same word. It can be a religious experience, a moment of intentionality experienced for a long time, a different relationship with space, a state of peace (releasement), or moving away from the circumstances of life. Living in a de facto secular environment, we first look at a mystical, but religion-independent state-event-affect.

This releasement comes primarily from a certain discomfort. Looking at the 21st century socio-health crisis that took place in the early 2020s and affected the whole world, looking at the condition's humanity had to endure, we see that this releasement is a by-product of suffering. Releasement can follow the reconciliation of bereavement, financial deprivation, existential crisis, a strange sense of time, and, finally, boredom leading to the thinning of consciousness. The story aims to reveal releasement as a (unexpected) side-effect of quarantine.

I AND MY KHRUSHCHEVKA (STORY)

Together, we recovered from the shock of confinement. Together, we fenced ourselves off behind the window, hiding from the virus particles – practically visible to the naked eye in our paranoia. Together, we forgot the toil of essential workers and, as the clock struck seven in the evening, we stopped clapping to those working their fingers to the bone in the medical field. Together, we no longer give a caring smile to delivery men taking their leave, but, on the contrary, we scrupulously inspect our soup for spillage, salad for scattering, and whether our Chicken Kiev has not gotten too cold. Together, we forgot the general agreement to allow *only* the elderly to shop during certain hours in the morning to protect them from the virus.

Together, we gained, for an indefinite period, a new and rather obnoxious friend – Boredom – characterised by an insecure ambivalent attachment style. It, clinging to us, seeking validation that it is wanted and loved, insecure, began pulling the wool over our eyes:

“Silence is not interesting!”

“A longer than two-minute video will not tell you anything worth hearing!”

“Learn French! No, learn Mandarin!”

“Knit a sweater for your cat ... Although don't bother, she will squirm out of this rag anyway!”

“Work out, work out, work out – endorphins, beautiful body. Everyone works out... except you.”

“Practice Transcendental Meditation! Did you see that your friend is in Bali? She posts live videos of herself doing yoga on the side of the ocean and repeating the mantra created for her “max-re-lax, max-re-lax”. Where is your *re-lax*? Why aren't you thinking about Enlightenment, not even with one little neuron of your brain?”

This is how we – together – have finally become the space we *consume*. And it is especially difficult when your own space is the thing you despise.

And what is there to love about it? Although I'm forced to stare at a few repeating components, these components are as ugly as they get. My space, that is my flat, where I endure these historical events, has a long history, but the longer I stay there, the uglier it gets.

I became my own space precisely at the coordinate xxx yyy zzz, in Kaunas, in a crowded neighbourhood of Eastern Europe. My space didn't bode well, and I had no idea where else could I seek refuge. I exchanged a sterile Ikea-furnished home without a single stain for peace. The peace to experience this time without worrying that I will transmit the virus to others, that I will be bothered when I am running out of time to wrap up my final thesis for the university degree, that I will be seen, evaluated, commented on when I experience new sensations and react to devastating global events. But it doesn't matter. I don't care

about it that much. I must focus on my work and try to ignore Lombardy, Wuhan, and Barcelona. And I am not thinking about my ageing parents living in another city. I am not thinking about how thin dad looks when I see him during our video chat. I am not thinking about how my mother contracted tuberculosis from her grandfather when she was two years old and spent several years in a sanatorium in Suvalkija⁵. She recovered, but sometimes still unloads her memories, like a daytime nightmare, on the family members:

5 Lithuanian ethnographic region on the left bank of Nemunas (the country's largest river).

"In my second year at the sanatorium, we sometimes were allowed to go for a weekend with the caretakers to a lake, where we could swim and have fun. I was really looking forward to those trips. One evening, before the next day's big voyage, we all were having dinner. At the end of the dinner, all the children in the sanatorium were given a hot cocoa drink with milk. Did you know that when hot milk sits for a while it forms a thick skin?⁶ that can make you gag when swallowed? I was a very dutiful girl, but I could not force myself to drink that skin. They tried to force me, motivating (threatening) me by not letting me go to the lake the next day. I spent Saturday all alone in the sanatorium."

6 Skin – a layer formed on hot milk or soup.

Or

"My friends from the sanatorium and I used to tell each other scary stories⁷. One night I got up wanting to go to the toilet. The toilet was at the end of the hall. It was dark around. Maybe I did see a witch fly by, I don't know, something flashed before my eyes. Well, I could not hold it any more. I crept down the corridor, opened the door, and lo and behold, sitting there on the night pot and staring right at me was a bear. I ran back to my bed and don't remem-

7 <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/siurpe/>

ber what happened afterwards. I just know that I never went to the toilet at night again.”

8 Khrushchiovka (Russian: хрущёвка) is a derisive term that was used (and sometimes is still used) to describe block and brick three- to five-story houses built en masse during Nikita Khrushchev's reign, designed by Vitaly Lagutenko.

There were many more memories of a similar gist, which would be labelled as trauma by today's Gen Z generation. Well, I don't care about my parents' childhood sufferings and current troubles. I care about finishing my studies. And about leaving here to continue the next level of education at a foreign university. Experience the world. See what an exchange of universal ideas

looks like. Abandon these Khrushchevka⁸ slums. My homeland does not correlate with my spirit.

How did I end up stuck in this ugly slum as the quarantine continues? Why isn't it at least someplace where the walls are thick and you can't hear the yelling of hangover neighbours, where the moss isn't threatening to take over the floor, and where the furniture is a tiny bit more modern?

While here... A flat was built in the 1970s. Khrushchevkas here stretch for kilometres. Everywhere you go, all you see is Khrushchevkas. At least if you don't see the miserable outside view, you can imagine that it's only the interior of your flat that is ugly, while others live in George Clooney's villa on the Lake Como in Italy. I keep the rubbish on the balcony as I don't want to go outside and touch the handles. What if there are virus particles that will crawl in through my pores while I sleep? I will get infected and sick. Oh no, I am not bothered by hypochondriacal thoughts at all. I am healthy, my body is healthy, and those young people (my age or even younger) who died from the virus are only an exception, only an exception. Anyways, I don't care.

I care that my carpets are dusty and half a century old. Who knows how many tiny dust mites live there? I am disgusted by their colours: faded yellow, faded red, and brown. Just looking at that ragged material makes my stomach turn; I don't want to walk over it barefoot.

I care that I have a ton of those brown leather edition books in my (worn-out) bookcase. I would like to have an aesthetic Penguin collection books with a comfortable font print, and I would like the books not to smell of old. I can't read either Cervantes, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, or

Rabelais. No one would eat the candy if it was wrapped in toilet paper.

I'm also baffled by the five empty rooms. There is plenty of room, but the emptiness reminds me of the people who used to live in that space, may they rest in peace – my grandmother, grandfather, and uncle. Emptiness does not give you peace, it only fills your head with more thoughts that irritate you, and it takes a lot of effort to stuff them into the box of denial and oblivion.

One of the five rooms is the living room. I used to stay there when I was little and came to visit my grandparents for entire weeks in the summer, spending the nights reading *Harry Potter*. In all seven books, you can still find traces of what I ate while reading, which is *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* Chapter 3 dyed tomato red. The remains of *Miglè* chocolate candy in *the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Sitting there in the living room is a table, two pompous chairs that look like over-fed comrade dictators. Difficult to move, bloated, ugly, in unnatural colour.

The second room – where my grandfather spent his last days – is where I hardly ever go. Maybe it's superstitions or fear of the image of death, maybe it's the interior that has remained almost unchanged, maybe it's the wardrobe full of moths, maybe it's the monochromatic photos of three or four generations of relatives that perplex me so much.

The third room used to be my uncle's. He suffered from renal failure and was bedridden for the last twenty years of his life because his pelvic bones had decayed and he was unable to walk. He used to have dialysis twice a day. While in bed, he would read Russian opposition texts, watch TV, and call me by his invented nickname to come and play with Barbies, if I wanted to. This bed, ten years after my uncle's death, is where I sleep now, as it has a great Dormeo mattress. However, I wouldn't say that I feel comfortable sleeping there. Not because of the structure of the mattress, but because of its experience and other people it used to have on top.

Next to the bed, there is a brown varnished wooden cabinet used to store various means for relieving the frustrations of my uncle's body, which up until now none of the living could bring themselves to throw away. There is a cigarette holder in the cabinet. Its cover has an image of the American Wild West – a desert and a cowboy leaning against a wooden fence. My uncle, getting into his wheelchair, would lock himself up in the toilet for a smoke a couple of dozen times a day. Next to my

uncle's room, there is the smallest room in the flat, which belonged to my grandmother. It used to be the cosiest place to stay. Now the most neglected one: walls gnawed by the merciless teeth of a rabbit and ten-year-old willow branches are not a definition of cosiness. A melancholic feeling is also brought about by the pile of books read by the grandmother in the years before her death.

The kitchen was the cosiest spot – at least you could catch some daylight there. Other rooms face the trees, which have long overgrown the level of third-floor windows, blocking the sun, as rare as it already is. The kitchen is a place where I make chickpea stew, it is a place where I join a virtual bar with my friends. However, it is also a place where I get disgusted by the gas stove and old sticky dishes (*mea maxima culpa*, I don't even know how to wash them properly due to my lack of interest in maintaining tidiness). If my space is me, then I am cluttered, abandoned, and unloved. A stranger. One to run from. But it doesn't matter. I don't even care.

20 April. A little over a month since the start of the collective confinement. I woke up screaming last night. I was screeching involuntarily for the first time. It's a peculiar feeling, it seemed that something foreign or an alien has taken over my body and is making this sound by forcing open my mouth.

I have had trouble sleeping since the start of the crisis that hit us all. At first it became very difficult for me to fall asleep at night. And now, I sleep like a Schrödinger's cat. Being half in each state is unpleasant, as is listening to two people talking at the same time. You are neither here nor there, but a little bit everywhere.

The abnormality of sleep epitomised itself during the alien possession, and something about that Munch scream haunts me long after I've sobered up from that sensation. The effect is still there.

I think my psyche was trying to tell me something: "My sweet girl, you *mi-issed it*" – Now I'm starting to think, is it a mistake to venture into those dark dungeons? Because I don't even care. I'm calm. The environment and being stuck are just annoying.

After all the screaming, I was lying in bed looking at the

light in the hallway because I was afraid to sleep in complete darkness, and I thought I heard some noises. The non-anonymity of this flat's experience began to symbolically create various scenarios. Uncle is rolling his wheelchair to the toilet to have a smoke. Grandma screams as she dreams of torture in Gulag? Grandpa wandering around the house, having forgotten where he is? Perhaps living with the fact of death is tiring. Is there a relationship with the flat, while calmly accepting the fact of the death of the people who existed in it? I believe that I have not completely transcended the superstitious astrological and spiritual realm of perception of the world. I'd rather be in a sterile flat with one piece of furniture.

I felt that I was about to bellow like a hyena, but I couldn't, I was still in a goddamn state of half-sleeping. I thought that there was someone in my home, I thought that it was a stranger, and at the same time, I felt very clearly that where I was lying now, is where many years ago my uncle used to lie. That mystical continuity is very awkward. I remember the terror that came over me, and I wouldn't say that waking up and realising it was just a dream helped me calm down.

Since the night screaming, I began to lose confidence in my opinion, state, and decisions. I began to believe little by little that my annoyance with the ugly environment, the desire for sterility, and the desire to be anywhere but here are only elementary things that are accidental rather than key components that caused the screaming. Does a person scream for no reason? Probably not. Doesn't a person who wakes up in the middle of the night and feels an indescribable horror until turning over and falling asleep again, suppresses something inside? Can disgust and displeasure be the reasons for screaming? I understand my grandmother's reminiscences. I understand that some experiences will live on in the body until we stop breathing. But what is wrong with me, why am I destroying my vocal cords for nothing?

However, everyone is a hostage to this situation and in one way or another everyone collectively seeks to escape the unknown, death, and sounds of ambulances.

Consciousness, be quiet, be quiet, be quiet. Yoga is better. Transcendental Meditation. Dreams of a post-pandemic world. Where

should I travel to? Some place where the ocean roars, elephants stomp around, and papayas grow? Or maybe I'll sail through the Drake Passage hoping to get the Drake Lake rather than the Drake Shake¹⁰ conditions... Or maybe I'll buy a cottage and a vineyard in Provence or Burgundy in France. I will tread the grapes barefoot, and barefoot I will sip those *processed* grapes on my veranda. I will learn French and discuss Marcel Proust with the locals when invited to a dinner party. I might even learn how to properly gut a

10 The Drake Passage is characterised by unpredictable conditions. Given that the currents of three oceans meet in this passage, it is one of the most dangerous tourist destinations, but the only way to get to Antarctica.

frog's leg and serve it in red wine and anchovy sauce; hopefully, a local woman living there will teach me.

That is what my dreams are. It should be possible! Why not? The main thing is to get out of here. What can the present and my region offer me? Cepelinai (Lithuanian potato dumplings) and sutartinės (Lithuanian multipart songs)? Maironis and Vincas Mykolaitis Putinas? Nine months long winters? Mass emigration and slow extinction of villages? Chauvinist politics and prejudice? Well, I firmly believed that, and being in a semi-reality, semi-dream world – aside from writing my academic paper – was the main activity of my collective confinement. What else is there to think about? I used to think about work, relationships, how to travel somewhere, how to get somewhere else on time, how to find time to relax, how to fulfil obligations more efficiently...

* * * * *

After being confined in this space, the latter daily sorrows disappeared; they were replaced by the superficial glimpses of dreams and some strange heartache and pressure in my chest. Could it be lack of magnesium? Maybe I don't work out enough? Maybe my thoughts are not positive enough? How come? I've been sending good vibes to the world! I even made an appointment with a transcendental meditation practitioner to get my mantra. Mine and no one else. It's just a pity that I can't tidy up even two square meters and turn them into a sterile, adequate place, well, at least a suitable one for a social space. Everyone will think I'm stuck in a slum. I am forced to lie that my camera is broken.

“Then how are you talking to me on a video call? You can take a video on your phone, you know so much about meditation and yoga,” asks my friend.

She didn't even know that I'd been toiling and moiling until I was able to find at least one presentable corner that would deceive her eye into thinking that this place was beautiful and neat.

“Well, you know, oh look, a bird!” I shout.

A bit of time is bought, and her attention is shifted to look for a bird. In the meantime, I will come up with a better excuse.

My flat is not modern. No room for soul liberation. Furthermore, neither my oatmeal with aesthetically presented pieces of fresh fruit and chia seeds nor green tea looks beautiful, no matter where. Now others will forget that I am the one who says not to give up, eat healthy, work out, and think positively during difficult moments. My ugly environment drained me of my very *essence* and for that I will never forgive it. Some people are just unlucky. And that failure is digging deeper into the soul.

My friend L managed to leave Lithuania before the borders closed, and where do you think she is stuck now? Well, on the island of Bali. Why, God, why this torture, why me? She called the other day, and couldn't stop talking, one experience is better than another. She was calling while sitting on a tanning bed. I could barely hear her voice over the sound of the ocean. But that didn't stop her from her loquacious narration. She rented a house by the ocean for pennies. She gets up at the crack of dawn, grabs her yoga and walks – a few meters – to the water. After that, she jogs along the shore. Then takes a clean shower and makes the same oatmeal. But is that porridge the same if consumed in different conditions? Does the yoga mat maintain its validity, or can this practice purify the soul and body if you lie down on a floor made of God knows what? One place is ugly, obsolete, and growing moss, the other is sterile and new. It seems that if I don't have the whole package, there's no point in carrying on with anything. I was stripped of the opportunity to be the queen of 21st century aesthetics and spiritual affairs, well, what's the difference? Almost the entire conversation was in a podcast format (I am in the role of a listener). When asked what I've been up to, I used the bird tactics again. It worked.

These interactions that force me to face my qualitative and quantitative deficiency, do affect me greatly. Am I really this jealous?

I am de facto happy for the happiness of others. But I am saddened by the sparseness and rarefaction of my happiness. I am saddened by being confined to the environment surrounding me. I am saddened by not knowing who I am and what I am doing. If my space is mercilessly stripping me of my attributes and the entirety of me, what can I do? It seems that a great personal and existential void has opened up.

Maybe I need to go back to my routine and think about my studies. Maybe what I am is my routine and what I write on a virtual scrap of paper. I will do without documenting my healthy buckwheat routine, my workouts, my positive thoughts, because I don't really have any anyway. I read and write until late at night. And after that, I twiddle my thumbs. I try not to think about my life. I watch the shows and laugh at people on the screen who entertain me. But I get tired of them too in a few hours, and the entire evening is left unoccupied. This is the time of day when I feel most perplexed. And the hardest one to withstand the unwanted thoughts.

* * * * *

11 A backless chair.
Barbarism from the Russian
language.

One evening, around nine o'clock, a few days after my strange dream and the screaming, I went into the kitchen, made some hemp and lemon balm tea, and turned off the lights. I put a stool (Lith.: *Taburetė*¹¹) by the window and made myself comfortable, hoping to find some peace.

At first, I was watching my neighbours. It is middle-aged people with their families or retirees who usually live in Khrushchevkas. There are hardly any young people. Even the nearby *IKI* store (still called by its former name – *Topolis*) is usually full of people who are already into the second half of their lives. These people still cook warm, somewhat complex dishes, while those few poor youngsters usually give in and indulge in exotic food delivered by couriers daily – sushi, ramen, and pizza.

People who cook spend a lot of time in the kitchen. Watching them is calming. From the outside, the existence of others seems to be idyllic, a carefree smooth ride through life. Maybe someone watching

me cook the only dish I know how thinks the same way? I doubt it. It is a universally known truth that young people are drowning in existential anxiety.

I also watch people watching TV. When we see our loved ones glued to the screen, we feel differently. You want to shake them to break up that dead, glassy gaze that doesn't even register the images on the screen. Sound provides comfort, but it seems to be the only entertainment a person can find. We want good for that person, we want him/her to live a more meaningful life.

However, these anonymous people, seem to be floating in some fog of peace. Having eaten, worked, and quarantined, they meditate on the couch. From time to time, they talk to one another. But everything is coated with soft melancholy. My eyes fall on an old man, probably in his eighties or nineties, reading a book. He seems quite intelligent and sensitive. In another block of flats, a woman is petting a tabby cat perched on the windowsill. In this moment, for both of them it is sufficient to be pet and be petting. Everyone's actions are assured, calm, and real. I even subjugate other senses, which, just like sight, can create various images, with reality polished off. My neighbours, for example, are listening to the radio. I too used to listen to the radio, in this very kitchen, when my grandmother was making me hot sandwiches with adjika sauce, cheese, and Bologna sausage. Most likely, these radio listeners also feel like little children and do not have a single worry in their heads. It is easy to idealise the environment and objects without letting them speak for themselves.

Finally, my eyes turned away from the human players and began to stare at the stars. They are especially bright tonight. Is it really true that after people stay at home for a few months, the pollution decreases, the smog clears up a bit, and dolphins swim in Venice's canals? The stars are extremely

bright. I see the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper.

And finally, I heard something unexpected. At first, I didn't even understand what I was hearing. Isn't it the sound of silence? Does silence have sounds? It sounded like a ringing, buzzing, white noise¹². I wonder how I lived my life without hearing silence. Maybe it is just the whooshing sound of my blood rushing. The same as the sound of the ocean that we don't hear in a shell.

¹² A noise reminiscent of the sound heard inside an airplane, intended for many to calm down. Especially popular among people with autism spectrum disorder. This sound is similar to humming, but because of its repetitive frequency, it often helps to focus or calm down. https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baltasis_triuk%C5%A1mas.

Peculiar, but whether it is the sound of my body or silence, it sent me spinning into thoughts, or rather images, running at a speed of five hundred kilometres per second, which, on one hand, feels foreign, on the other hand, are my life experiences: like when I was a child, in elementary school, playing dodgeball¹³, I made a fool of myself in front of all my classmates while trying to avoid being hit by the ball. How my mother cried when her father, suffering from Alzheimer's, ran away from home, and no one could find him for several days, until someone in another town, ten kilometres from home, finally recognised him and brought him back. This time, memories seem to matter. What is this feeling in my chest? How does it feel to care?

13 Dodgeball is a team sport in which players on two teams try to throw balls and hit opponents while avoiding being hit themselves.

Sometimes I become one with my stool. The body no longer feels corporeal, like a static substance. I have had attacks of hypochondria since I was eleven years old. I have also picked out my favourite incurable diseases that I suffer from cyclically. Therefore, I am used to scanning my body. Sometimes it even seems that my consciousness is like a probe passing through the chest, brain, liver, blood, bones, kidneys, skin... and keeps getting stuck in some place, saying:

“Problem, problem... but it's too late. Go to a hospice if you can stay there for at least one day before dying.”

Because of this, I experience an unknown sensation. It seems that the body, as a separate object that belongs to me, has spilled out and splashed over everything around. It sounds like the last scene of Monty Python's 'The Meaning of Life', depicting an obese man literally explode after yet another excessive meal, splattering his insides all over people dining at the restaurant. Maybe not so grotesquely, but I also splattered all over my surroundings.

My awareness of myself as a subject seems to have disappeared. Obviously, I think through the 'I' prism: my thoughts, my experiences, my environment, which I share with others. You can't deny that no matter how much you practice Zen Buddhism. But I seem to have reached something that neither yoga, nor transcendental meditation, nor mindfulness¹⁴ has helped me to achieve. I deliquesced in my

14 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness>

kitchen. I wonder if I'm deliquesced in other rooms too?

In the beginning, I said with dissatisfaction that I had become my own space. The one that imprisoned me, restricted me, prevented me from as much as virtual participation in society. Why does this deliquescence feel different?

First of all, I seem to be letting go of various details that I have considered to be me. As I sit and look at seniors reading, cats being pet, nimble people busy in the kitchen, I see that the links with regional images are strong and metaphysical. Practices that my space forbade me to document nicely or perform altogether because of the perceived sterility were illuminated in a completely different light in a few moments of releasement. Time stood still and I stood with it.

After a few moments I realised that my buttocks were getting numb from all the sitting. Soviet stools are definitely not the most comfortable invention. This bodily sensation passed through my body like an electric current and prompted me to walk around the flat. Walking around the flat – that sounds strange. Well, after all, at one time, four people in four rooms used to live here. There is enough space to walk around.

* * * * *

I walk over that same carpet that disgusted me so much. Its diverse woven ornaments somewhat resemble DNA cells. I follow each cell junction with my eyes. It seems that I am inside a cell or mitochondrion magnified a million times. I touch the surface of the carpet. It's rough. The carpet is very old and worn out, but its material reminded me of the time when I would drop down on the carpet in a childish fit, when my grandmother or parents would not allow me to do something or scold me for something. However, these moments do not cause any negative emotions, but only cheer me up, because I have a feeling that I am remembering this detail about myself for the first time.

I walk slowly past the bookcase – section – where books with brown imitation leather covers are rotting. I'm flipping through them. I discovered that in some places my grandfather underlined different sentences that seemed important to him. In some places along the edge of the page, he even scribbled down, rather illegibly, his thoughts. From the inten-

sity of the notes on the edges, I noticed that the *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* part of 'The Three Metamorphoses' produced the largest heap of emotions in him. I also notice that the handwriting reminds me a bit of that of my dad's. Flipping through the pages, I sit on a chair resembling a dictator's belly. I haven't noticed how I lost myself in it. It is so big and stalwart that I can even tuck my legs under and cover myself with a grey wool blanket. The kitchen is a little too far though; if I had some caraway tea in my hand, I could sit here into midnight. I fell in and distilled myself in this brown material.

However, after a while, I get up. I slowly go to the room that used to be my grandfather's. Several portraits are hanging in the room. My aunt. My grandmother. My grandmother's family. Grandfather. I look at their features. I can see who I inherited my long nose from. Who gave me that particular shape of the eyes? For a moment, even my dad's smile flashed on my great grandmother's face. In the same room where a couple of moths fly around, I put on my grandmother's fur hat and fur coat. I giggle at the thought of how this outfit would provoke an outburst of anger in activists. They might have even doused me with red paint, yelling:

"Murderer, murderer!"

Times are changing. For better and for worse. In this case, for better. Having put on my fancy hat, I go to my bedroom, which used to be my uncle's room. I read his letters. I noticed that we read (used to read) the same Russian opposition books. Looking back, I remember his sense of humour and how much I used to laugh at various little things he would come up with when he was tired of lying in bed. Finally, I step into the smallest room with gnaw marks on the walls. I hover there for half an hour to the rhythm of the ticking clock, thinking about how my grandmother used to listen to Mary's radio on this very corner of the sofa and praying for everyone who just happened to be on her mind.

After this voyage, which lasted for who knows how many hours, I decided to make potato pancakes. There was a sound of release-ment in the air.

PART TWO

HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE (FROM THE PLAY NO EXIT)

This is what Jean–Paul Sartre, a famous 20th century existentialist and phenomenologist once said. What does this age–old sentence mean? How does this sentence unfold in the living empirical world? How do we feel this hell in the 21st century and how do we escape from it?

In both the virtual and physical worlds, we as a human species seem to seek shelter to shield ourselves from the gaze of the Other. Why do we hide our habits that we consider shameful? Why do we speak one way in a certain group of people and another in a different group? Why is school one of the biggest challenges for our sociability? It often seems that if we had to repeat this experience – spending most of our time for twelve years among age–mates in the post–Soviet period, i.e., when bullying is a very common phenomenon – we would rather decline. From these and even earlier institutions, we learn to mediate with our emotions, actions, and to crack the code to know how to avoid being bullied.

We learn to show society the side of ourselves which we can share until the authentic elements no longer exist. The story of ‘Reflection in Bali’ is a depiction of how individuals can align their essence with popular practices and popular market demands until the outside gaze strips away all selfhood.

REFLECTION IN BALI (STORY)

Lithuania. The grim winter period. The holiday season is over, the presents have been unwrapped, the fireworks have all been set off, and the sparkling wine bottles have been emptied. It's been three weeks since the New Year, people are beginning to gradually abandon their New Year's resolutions and no longer stick to their goals. Wellness gurus L and V, drunk on red wine and pigged out on cheese and olives, are talking about their failing online business, a website where they post holistic mind and body training practices:

“Be that as it may, but Lithuanians don't know how to enjoy life. It's only the third week, and everyone has dropped their New Year's resolutions, criticises others, and is generally physically and spiritually stagnant,” – snorted L.

“Yes, yes, you know, this is the collective trauma talking. The Soviets did a number on us, leaving us resigned, indignant, still looking at the grass on the other side”, – described her social community in a knowledgeable tone V.

“What bad luck for us to be born and have to create our business in such an environment. If we were in the West, where people are normal, able to relax and enjoy life, we would have made it a long time ago. Now it's like offering a stalk of celery to a lion... I don't know what to do,” L sighed sorrowfully, “Who wouldn't like self-help courses, a weekly blog on the best books and podcasts, your masterful yoga and meditation classes? Why are we such

a dense and uneducated society...”

“You can’t get pigs interested in diamonds, honey.”

“Maybe this is the answer, my handsome V? Maybe they are not our audience? Imagine if we teach only those who are interested in living a quality life. Should we be expanding to foreign markets?”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, think about it. Eastern Europe is now the

“It” region for the West. At least that’s what TikTok says. Everyone is interested in our fierceness, and Slavic behaviour. It doesn’t matter that we’re not even Slavs, those Westerners can’t tell the difference. A self-help podcast hosted by two gurus of ambiguous identity. Neither Europeans nor Asians, some anonymous people. Let’s monetise this advantage of ours?”

“An advantage? What? And most importantly how? I think you’ve had too much wine, L.”

“Or maybe it’s a stroke of genius? How many years have we been slaving away trying to educate the Lithuanian society, to teach it healthy ways and balanced life?

Hopeless. Everything is. Let’s look for a new consumer. Of course, the basis of our website would remain the same – promotion of Eastern culture for self-help purposes, but we can also toss in some Lithuanian, Baltic¹⁵, or, as I already mentioned, Slavic elements... And maybe Lithuanian emigrants will become interested. They have already assimilated into their Belgians, Germans, and Americans, but maybe it will spark up some nostalgia?”

15) Balts are an Eastern European tribe whose language was formed from the Indo-European tradition. The roots of the Baltic tribe go back to 3000 BC. More about this in Edmund Bunkše and Wolf Tietze, ‘Baltic peoples, Baltic culture, and Europe: Introduction’. *GeoJournal* (1994): 5–8.

“So, we are changing the audience and making a mixture of cultures for self-education?”

L pondered on this question for a few minutes, fiddling with her yet another glass of wine, until, finally, her eyes lit up:

“We’re moving to Bali,” said L confidently.

“Or maybe, we’re moving to a psych ward? What does Bali have to do with anything?” – V asked confused, unable to keep up with L’s brainstorm.

“Have you heard about digital nomads?”

“Those who travel while working remotely? And document their polished aesthetic journey on Instagram?”

“Yes, exactly. We can become like that as well.

* * * * *

February 2020. L and V, having forgotten their conversation, continue their monotonous translation and legal work, trying from time to time to revive the self-help website for the Lithuanian public. Everything seems to run its course; the days are pretty much the same.

However, in the middle of February, news spread about the threat of a strange virus that came from Asia.

¹⁶ The most popular website for COVID-19 tracking.

The world didn’t care about the force of nature tearing China apart, but as cases popped up in Europe and took hold in Italy, people began to

whisper. Whispers were barely audible while Lithuania proudly counted zero cases on coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html¹⁶.

28 February has dawned. Nothing special, nothing outstanding was to be expected. However, this day was important to show this region that Lithuania, otherwise known as God’s ear¹⁷, is not protected from the threat

17 “God’s ear” is a metaphor for a place of safety.

that has befallen humanity. We were, are and will be connected. Air droplets don’t see country borders, they don’t see Schengen, they don’t see strange limits that only human intelligence can come up with. This was proven by the first case of the virus reported in Lithuania.

The spectrum of reactions, rising by several points in two weeks, ranged from alpha to omega. Denial, panic, blame, drastic measures (unprecedented purchase of toilet paper, various models of haute-couture medical masks, games “who didn’t wash their hands for long enough?” and the like).

Disarray reached L and V. The universal upheaval acted like the ripples of an ocean, stirring up everyone wantoning in it.

L, having agreed to meet up with V to discuss matters, sits in a café waiting. Tapping her foot, she is looking around, frowning at a slight coughing of others. Finally, when she sees V approach, she straightens up, as if ready for a serious attack.

“Hi, I’m sorry for being late, but the traffic is terrible, seems like everyone is rushing to Lidl to buy all the canned food or toilet paper...” V blurted out running in, with his jacket still on.

“Oh, ok, all right, no problem, listen. Remember when we talked about how cool it would be to move to another country and stream our content from there?”

“You did. But yes, I remember. What about it?”

“Let’s go. To Bali. We will create our own website, teach people how to live proper and healthy life. I’ve arranged digital nomad passports for us. There are many different nuances, but, the good news is that we meet the requirements! Let’s finally invest ourselves in it. Wasn’t that our dream? Imagine – we are sitting by the ocean... wait a second, is that the ocean or the sea there? Oh well, who cares. The important thing is that it looks beautiful and is immediately associated with Oriental wisdom. Who

would want to learn these truths when they see a guru stuck in some ugly Khrushchevka? Trashy. So, get this, we sit on the beach, create content, work out, I bet you yourself will come back enlightened like Buddha and then we could-..."

V interrupts L's feverish ranting:

"Fine."

"Fine? That's it?"

"Yes. Let's hurry while we can. We can escape from the global panic about this tiny virus. We will be able to teach the world in isolation. My favourite method. No need to communicate. Just show. And they learn. Obediently, like children."

"I did not expect it would be so easy to talk you into it."

"Me neither. We finally need to do something."

* * * * *

18 A city in Indonesia.

19 The capital of Bali.

Scene at the airport. It only took L and V a few days to plan the trip and book a flat with a pool and bamboo walls in Negara¹⁸, Bali. The place was located a few dozen meters from the water, which turned out to be the Indian Ocean.

Flight from Vilnius Airport to Denpasar¹⁹, Bali. V and L couldn't wait to leave their constantly disappointing homeland. Even the masked individuals cannot take away their joy and enthusiasm. The excitement of travel, which marks the beginning of a new life, affects the friends differently: Without saying a word, V lets the dreams ripple through his mind, staring at the Duty Free shop but not actually seeing it. V's great con-

centration stirs up L, who, on the contrary, keeps on babbling, occasionally taking a sip of *Evian* water for her dry mouth: “Pure Swiss water for a pure experience,” she thought, investing three euros in a half-litre bottle, voicing her train of thought to an inattentive audience:

20 Yoga poses.

21 In other words, the cobra pose. Modern yoga exercise.

“You know how many new asanas²⁰ I’ve discovered while packing? I can already see which ones will be perfect on the beach, and which ones by the pool, but I can’t decide on *bhujangasana*²¹, do you think its vibe is better suitable for a green environment or water? Or maybe actually at home? I’ve seen on various channels that placing the animal in front of the window can get more views. Where will we get an animal? Maybe a Komodo dragon will show up, *ha ha ha*, well then I would definitely stand out from all the yogis in the world. Actually, who knows, maybe you can rent a puppy in Bali? Do you think it will make everything look nicer? Although, on the other hand, maybe the dogs in the yoga videos are old news? What if the animal I rent will be poorly trained, it will only ruin the whole atmosphere for me, well, I don’t know, I don’t know...”

“They’re boarding,” – said V shaking off his dreams.

* * * * *

L and V have been living in Negara for two weeks now. Digital nomadism is based on the principle that workers must change their place of residence every few months and, in the literal sense of the word, wander around without having a permanent place to live. However, who

knows how the quarantine measures will affect the principles of these people and the work itself. There is no need to think about it for now.

A full two-week quarantine has just been announced in Lithuania. For travellers L and V, everything seems to be running like clock-work. Both feel an emotion that they try to run away from because it is

22 In Lithuania, as in many other countries, there were (and still are) corona-sceptic individuals who refused to obey the quarantine orders, avoided wearing masks, did not trust the orders of the government in general, believing that the virus is a way to enrich the elite and control the masses.

not in the least consistent with their doctrine of gratitude and kindness to others. This emotion is effect – a kind of malevolence, satisfaction with one's own experience, compared to the people left in their homeland, who are struggling with the greyness and desolation, resenting each other, the cloudy sky and endless winter, and mistrust those in power²². Meanwhile, these two are combating the growing number of followers, good weather, and fruits of indescribable fresh-

ness. It seems that the virus doesn't exist either – when you don't speak Indonesian and don't know the locals, neither the number of cases, nor quickly occupied and quickly disappearing places in the hospitals are of no concern, it doesn't scare you and doesn't appear in your dreams in the form of nightmares either. They also rarely call their family in Lithuania, because “all they do is complain”.

After settling down, starting to conduct remote meditation and yoga classes, and actively filling the content of the page with various articles about conscious mindfulness, monism and energy, the routine has taken shape. Just as corporate employees go to work to warm their chairs from eight to five, L and V, like soldiers, cooked up content and educated the public, which welcomed this knowledge with open arms in these troubled times. It was not even necessary to check the statistics – as long as coins fall into the virtual pocket, your face, your birthplace, gender, habits or age are of no interest. And papayas remain delicious and fresh.

Yes, work can sometimes become a set of repetitive actions that create a robotic feeling. But who can get tired of the practices that purify the soul? And, of course, fills the wallet.

20 MARCH

SARVANGASANA.

MATSYASANA.

PASCHIMOTHANASANA.

L: “It’s a strange day, I didn’t feel anything today. Maybe I didn’t match the asanas well? Do you think the pressure is low?”

V: “Oh, that’s interesting. I feel out of steam today too. Well, there are different kinds of days. How many people joined the live stream?”
“Five hundred.”

“Same here. So, it’s all good. It means we are doing everything right.”

23 MARCH

HALASANA.

BHUVANGASANA.

SALABHASANA.

On this day, L was talking to her friend from Lithuania. Since L has abandoned nearly all contact with her friends, she cherished this short conversation, told all about her impressions from Bali, how meaningful her life is, how she feels close to enlightenment, and how the crashing of the waves soothes her. The friend was very quiet and muttered something strange about a bird flying by.

25 MARCH

DHANURASANA.

SIRSASANA.

SARVANGASANA.

V: “L, does it ever happen to you that you can’t feel the asanas? Yesterday I saw a local working out here, he seemed to have his chakras fully open, but I... I don’t know, don’t you sometimes feel like you’re faking it?”

“These practices are not specific to the region they originated from. They are a gift to all mankind. Why are you so pessimistic?” – replied L with irritation, keeping to herself that for as much as a week, she’d been feeling constant existential emptiness, while yoga and meditation felt like an obligation, not a source of peace or a path to completeness.

“You are right. I’m probably not trying hard enough. I catch myself thinking a lot about my relatives and friends back in Lithuania. Perhaps my focus is not on the here and now. In Lithuania, people isolate themselves physically, but it seems that social solidarity prevails. And we isolated ourselves both ways. How long can a person survive alone with his most precious asanas and mantras assigned by the world’s most famous gurus, when all support is tens of thousands of kilometres away? How many namastes and asanas can a person from the Baltic country take on?”

“Maybe you just didn’t sleep well last night?”

“Maybe I didn’t. But you know what I dreamt about? That I was eating lard with tomato and bread. Loaded with tomato and bread!!! In Lithuania, no one could ever force me to eat that – carbohydrates and fat, is my subconscious laughing at me...”

26 MARCH

HALASANA.

MATSYASANA.

PASCHIMOTHANASANA.

L's mother caught coronavirus. She had to go to the hospital to be put on a ventilator because she couldn't breathe. L secretly wiped away exactly three tears while doing one of her live training sessions. She spent the rest of the day in bed checking her phone, jumping at each message.

"When my mother recovers, I will return to practice full of motivation and gratitude to the universe. For now, I just want to rest a bit. I hope, V, that you won't be angry with me if we don't have dinner together today. I don't have the energy. I'll have a McDonald's combo meal delivered."

"Can you order McFlurry and fries for me? Thank you."

30 MARCH

BHUJANGASANA.

SALABHASANA.

DHANURASANA.

L's mother recovered and was discharged from the hospital yesterday. L did not regain her motivation for spiritual practice. All last week, V had dreams of the streaming Merkys River, his mother's smiling face and Lithuanian potato dumplings.

1 APRIL

HALASANA.

SIRSASANA.

MATSYASANA.

GRETA AMBRAZAITĖ NORKŪNĖ

Greta Ambrazaitė–Norkūnė is a Lithuanian poet, musician, and translator from Spanish, who has recently published her second book of poems. She publishes her work in the country's most important cultural publications and actively participates in literary events. Her work combines anthropological and feminist themes.

GRETA AMBRAZAITĖ NORKŪNĖ

THE ISLAND
WHERE ANXIETY
PEOPLE MEET

NOVELLA

There was nothing special about this island – except what looms around it, instilling fear and horror. The island represented the grey area, but Lucia couldn't remember how it was called for the life of her. The Island, she thought? Simple as that?

Passengers from all the continents of the world were rushed into the Island by their thoughts. Refugees, all of them. Your ticket was that familiar feeling of losing the grip on reality. And these tickets were dispersed to people of all races, all nations and religions – office workers, postmen, waiters and altar servers, superstars and lunatics, street sweepers and professors, organists and town drunks, people suffering from high cholesterol and raw vegans, singletons and mothers of five – lines and lines of never-ending people crossed their seas of anxiety, frenziedly looking for a moment of peace. They would berth their boats in the Island's harbour and then leave the heavy perpetually relating chains of their unyielding thoughts behind. Like snakes moulting their skins, they would shed their old thoughts and let them sink to the bottom. Only the murmuring of the sea, like reassuring white noise, could be heard on the beach. This was paradise lost. Naked and vulnerable, deprived of thoughts and anxiety, people would then stroll down the sandy beaches like an army of shadows, looking at the sky with their hands covering their brows, and drying their hair. And that's it. The Island provided them with the temporary relief needed to get back on their feet and return to their ordinary lives.

There was no sickness and no work duties on the Island. Having come there, people would lose their memories and be reborn every second – over and over again. The Island was a release, it gave its visitors the indispensable opportunity to leave their everyday worries behind. They called this journey “a luxury of escape”. This “luxury”, of course, was only possible in the most stressful of moments. The price of the ticket was an abyss opening under your feet, after all.

Some months are typically busier on the Island than usual. More people flood to it in times of collective malice that touches the lives of many – wars, revolutions, epidemics and pandemics. The majority comes here right before midnight, when they’re finally able to stretch their legs after an exhausting day, their debilitating thoughts still clinging to them like superglue. Like sirens, they entice their owners to venture into the endless ocean of the unknown.

One morning at the end of May, Lucia found out that her dad was sick. Even though coughing incessantly almost to the level of suffocation, he was adamant in his decision not to go to a checkpoint for testing. For a couple of months now, all news channels have been flooded with information about the new virus that takes the lives of numerous people every day. Dad doesn’t budge: you have to trust God who is the only to decide who lives and who dies even amidst this entire madness. Lucia is persistent in her quiet efforts to tolerate her father’s stubbornness. She’s patient enough to take his calls. However, the path towards peace or at least clarity seems so excruciatingly long.

This became apparent when Dad started going on walks to a nearby forest and then sending her letters afterwards, filled with long lists of things he spotted lying around, discarded. Having opened her mailbox, Lucia would find another one there – and, while going up the staircase to her apartment on the fifth floor, she would open the envelope, take the crumpled piece of paper out and read the scattered words, written with a pencil: “Sweetie, here are all the things I’ve found today. It’s crazy, how much good stuff people throw out these days. Maybe, you could use some of it, too. Call me.” The important list will be written down below. A somewhat varying collection, it would always include the main items: some kindling wood, bags, tins, newspapers, syringes, vodka bottles. Some of the rarer ones were pants, a chair, a shoe, a hat, a phone, a cent and a half-full pack of

cigarettes. On several occasions, there was also a sofa, a set of headphones, a jacket, a backpack, an earring and a banknote. Lucia would not reply to her father's letters. Conversations on the phone were pretty normal unless the topics of television or the corrupted government that wants to make all people sick sprung up. The mental illness her father was diagnosed with fifteen years ago, which manifested by obsessive thoughts and erroneous beliefs, has become such an integral and mundane part of her family's life like taking their dog for a walk. The bouts were rare, and people around them saw her dad as an ordinary, kind person – a bit bizarre, maybe, but well-wishing in general. As the years went by, Lucia's mom started seeing him in the same light – as a simple, goodhearted man, a little strange yet benevolent roommate, whose kinks were not worth paying attention to. All objections and efforts to bring their husband and father back to lucid thinking only increased the repulsion he felt towards the world – both Lucia and her mom came to this understanding many years ago.

So, for Lucia, the only way to live her life was to ignore what's been happening. To pretend there's no elephant in the room. To persuade herself that her parents' home looks quite normal that dad's room is not brimming with various rummages, utensils and plain garbage, and that there's no shame in having a friend over or bringing your partner to meet the family if such a need arises. Having come to her parent's apartment, Lucia would wander around, her gaze fixed on different piles of dirty stuff that would never be used and should be immediately taken to a recycling point or a garbage container. Lucia didn't blame her dad for this situation. Nor her mom – forced to live in a home like that, she may have lost her peace of mind years ago. But inertia is stronger than grudge or rebellion. This person was sick, let's not forget that. Just one year ago, another diagnosis was added to his medical records – compulsive hoarding, also known as hoarding disorder.

So, Lucia kept this charade of pretending not to care for many months in a row. Secretly, she hated that forest and that apartment which was slowly but surely becoming a hellhole. She couldn't wrap her head around the fact that the place wasn't creeping with hordes of mice and cockroaches. Dad has started checking the garbage bin for his "treasures" that might have been secretly thrown out. When his daughter came to visit, he'd take her to his room and show all the new findings with pride.

Irrespective of their true value, he loved them. They were free, after all, and, in Dad's mind, this quality signified his ability to hustle and go about life in a smart way. Lucia hated his favourite phrase "It might come in handy in the future, you never know" and her mom's constant teaching "Just ignore it". But her dad's educational reprises were the hardest to bear: "Those stores are only trying to rob you. You can find the majority of things free-of-charge." Yeah, like somebody's trash thrown out in the forest that you keep bringing home.

On the 16th of May, Lucia received another letter:

Sweetheart, this is today's catch. Soon you'll have to wear a facemask while going to a store. So, I'll grab some for you too, ok?

1. A bottle – 2 units
2. A button – 1
3. A facemask – 3
4. Men's trousers, warm, size 40, just my size but could fit John, too (ask him) – 1
5. A grocery bag, a small hole next to the handle – 1
6. A fishing rod shaft, broken but fixable – 1

Which things should I put aside for you? Call me.

Dad

Facemasks. He started bringing used disposable facemasks home. Lucia was shocked. Running up the stairs to her apartment on the fifth floor, she grabbed the phone to call Mom. Not to inform she needs the used facemasks, of course, but to get a feel on the graveness of the situation.

"Mom, what's happening? He's sent me a letter saying he's found some facemasks in the forest."

"Lucia, darling, he did, yeah, but it's not a big deal. You know your father. I'm just happy he hasn't started dragging old furniture home yet."

“But, Mom, it’s dangerous, think about it – what if infected people have worn them? He’s touching them, maybe, even putting them on his face.”

¹ Since the very start of the lockdown, people started massively ordering food online. This was a way to avoid the virus spreading through different surfaces and stay away from grocery stores as much as possible.

“Let’s not go into this, it’s his choice, there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“At least be careful – please, Mom.”

“Oh, I am, darling. Couriers¹ bring us food. I rarely leave the apartment anymore. And your father can’t infect me, because the forest is the only place he goes to. All the fresh air there, it’s healthy. He has nothing else to do. And I like him out of the apartment, that way I don’t have to deal with him all the time.”

This time Lucia hung up the phone without even saying goodbye.

She felt restless and out of place all evening, trying to cope with the rage and hurt brought about by helplessness. Finally, when she managed to go to bed, her mind was tormented by a slew of never-ending horrible images: ambulances, lung ventilators, her mom or dad lying in a hospital bed, resuscitation, a call from the hospital informing “We’ve got bad news. I’m sorry, there was nothing more we could do.” All night, she kept tossing and turning in bed. Lucia didn’t look at her phone, so the hours went by unnoticed. Terrified to face tomorrow, she kept crying, with her face buried in the pillow, feeling no sense of control, losing the grip on reality, fixating on the single thought – the worst-case scenario of her parents dying. When the tears finally stopped rolling down her cheeks, Lucia vacantly stared at the ceiling. It was flickering with solitary shadows, cast by the trees outside her window. And that flickering started swaying her as a gentle dance of waves. She heard the gentle murmur of the ocean, a refreshing caress of white noise washed over her. Lucia’s eyes began to close. “Sleep is a luxury that lets you escape reality,” was her last thought before the dreams came.

Soon Lucia was enveloped by warmth that made her body feel like a weightless buoy gently rocking in the water. Her body dislodged itself from the shore – from the fear and anguish, she felt about her parent's lives, from other worries and concerns, and floated away towards the horizon. Then Lucia reached the Island, a blissfully calm place. There were no diseases. No perturbations. Just light. And peace.

US, EATING OUR TAIL

AN ESSAY

*All the archaic, anachronistic forms are there ready to re-emerge, intact and timeless, like the viruses deep in the body. History has only wrenched itself from cyclical time to fall into the order of the recyclable.*² Jean Baudrillard

² Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 27.

Each day, we feel the urge to seek comfort and oblivion in the thought that everything is the same, everything's in place, and tomorrow is going to be just as today is – you wake up, take a shower, clothe yourself, drink your coffee, eat breakfast, grab an empty yoghurt container from the table, take it to the garbage bin, extend your arm to throw it away, and then suddenly, out of the corner of your eye, you see a coiled snake eating its tail at the bottom of your yoghurt container. It asks you what is this morning about, and then sinks its sharp teeth into your skin to remind you that today is indeed different. Through the bite, it infuses you with confusion. The plastic container you've just eaten your yoghurt from does not have a tail-eating snake – the Ouroboros – in it, it's just the universal recycling symbol, an arrow moving in a circle. But from that second on, everywhere you look you see the Ouroboros³.

3 Ouroboros, emblematic serpent of ancient Egypt and Greece represented with its tail in its mouth, continually devouring itself and being reborn from itself. A gnostic and alchemical symbol, Ouroboros expresses the unity of all things, material and spiritual, which never disappear but perpetually change form in an eternal cycle of destruction and re-creation. In the 19th century a vision of Ouroboros gave the German chemist August Kekule von Stradonitz the idea of linked carbon atoms forming the benzene ring. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*)

4 Fragment 45. Heraclitus. *Fragments*, trans. M. Adoménas. Vilnius: Aidai, 1995, p. 90.

5 Don Quixote's fight with windmills is, most probably, the most well-known episode of the novel *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes. The main character of the book is a member of the lowest nobility, an hidalgo named Alonso Quijano, who embarks on an adventure-filled journey to fight evil. After reaching La Mancha, he sees several windmills there and, thinking they're evil giants with huge arms, pointlessly attacks them.

How haven't you noticed sooner? Ouroboros is the most mundane, the most common mythological creature that exceeds all others in its popularity. *Re-cycle*. Restart the circle. As "i the case of a circle, beginning and end are the same"⁴, according to Heraclitus. The arrow – on glass and plastic containers, beer or trash cans, on posters and social ads – is always eating its tail.

In the 21st century, the Ouroboros speaks to us in the medieval alchemist language, which has always remained relevant. The need to turn one material into another, to transform one thing into something else has never been more significant. What a unique goal – individual but universal – which distributes personal responsibility to each human being in a boundless global crowd and, at the same time, allows to disappear in it entirely: if it's inconvenient, your conscience can be silenced, if you're tired – you can give up, lose your enthusiasm and determination, if you're too lazy to recycle – drop this habit and erase this routine from your everyday life. I know people who cannot see any Ouroboros at the bottoms of plastic containers. In the same way, people don't notice that their bodies have skeletons – until they break a bone. According to them, everyday recycling is futile, because corporations pollute our environment to an unimaginable extent. Thus, one person's efforts remind them of Don Quixote's fight with windmills⁵. However, in this case, the "windmills" are authentic. The threat

they pose to the planet's future can be noticed in the constantly fluctuating temperatures, earthquakes and extinction of species.

In the 21st century, the Ouroboros is a symbol of hope. It provides a certain

comfort. It can be compared to an archaic prophet, fighting his way into modern times. However, prophets typically warn us about global catastrophes, not slow mundane flows, as we like to imagine it. We want to see it in a much more moderate form: the message it brings talks about repetition, perfect cycles, eternity, eternal dynamics, constant rebirth and healing – in space, on Earth, in nature. The Ouroboros represents renewable resources that remind us of how feelings and thoughts keep renewing in a person until their last breath. Maybe, this is where we should be looking for stability and order, or, in other words, the face of God, reflected on the world? In sunlight, wind, dancing waves, bubbling steaming geysers, thriving greenery, flowing rivers and their tides. In everything that circulates and has the power to recreate itself. In our latitude, this is the way the seasons change: first comes spring, then summer, autumn, winter, and then spring again – each starts where the previous ended, eventually they all disappear into each other. In many different folklores, spring is typically associated with childhood, summer – with youth, autumn – with maturity, and winter – with old age. But what happens, when summer comes too early? When, because of climate change, youth stumbles upon their childhood, autumn becomes short, and it begins to snow in October? The 21st century makes us question many similar common metaphors of the past. I don't want to indulge in futurology, but people of my generation are hesitant to compare the chronology of their lives to any kind of natural cycle, as all cycles have become pretty unpredictable nowadays.

In ecology, there are numerous cycles and self-supporting systems – like water, carbon and nitrogen cycles. Every one of them spins the circle in different reservoirs of life, present in the atmosphere, the oceans or plants. Just like the Ouroboros, all these cycles are interconnected and self-sufficient. The Ouroboros is life itself, its essence is the principle of survival – organisms in the different levels of the food chain become dependent on one another to survive. Predators feed on prey, the prey feeds on plants or other beings from the lower levels. In nature, each organism plays the parts of being a predator and the prey at the same time – the Earth keeps devouring its tail but never loses balance. The climate is also a closed system with many different factors in constant interaction, which keep the temperature relatively stable. If the balance of the cycle is disrupted, the Ouroboros is disrupted as well.

However, nowadays human beings tend to go to extremes. Today, the Ouroboros are in the middle of the chaos that has spread throughout the civilization created by our species. The period after global industrialization has been marked by rampant consumption and a way of life that doesn't acknowledge the past and doesn't recognise the possible future. The imbalance in the Earth's climate systems, caused by human activities, is disrupting many cycles and systems that are necessary for life on our planet – the chain of water, carbon dioxide and food. So, then the Ouroboros smashes the Earth with its tail, and suddenly you understand that, compared to what climate change has caused and will cause in the future, the coronavirus pandemic is only merely a lesson in survival. I vividly remember the news footage of numerous huge fires on the West Coast of the US in 2020, the smoke of which even travelled to Northern Europe. But that wasn't the end of it. Then we had massive fires in Europe – Turkey, Greece, Spain, Italy, Malta... Are heat waves, air pollution and floods just temporary chaos, caused by the poundings of the Ouroboros' tail, or is it our new permanent reality? Will 2002, when one of the biggest icebergs in human history (the size of which would approximately equate to 10 per cent of Lithuania's territory) broke away from an ice shelf in the Antarctic, be one of the most significant dates of the Anthropocene Epoch? Not in terms of the extent of the event, but more as a symbol. 2002 is already called "the year zero", which marks the point in time when the consequences of climate change started becoming apparent. Maybe, the Ouroboros' scales represent the sequence of the passing time, and some of the patches have been already irrevocably damaged. And that could be the reason for its rage, regular slaps of its tale or bursts of fire from its mouth that melt the glaciers and destroy entire forests. So the Ouroboros in my yoghurt pot is not just a symbol for recycling. It's also a warning about the dangers that await when balance is disrupted.

A MONOLOGUE OF A SOUL REINCARNATION OFFICE WORKER, WRITTEN DOWN WITH A LEAD PENCIL IN SPACE DURING THE YEARS OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

AN ESSAY

Taking all the risk factors into account, your decision to catapult yourself to Earth this year — when stocks are on fire, people are dropping dead like flies and dolphins are flying above water in Venice — is a bit strange. Long story short, we have a serious case of disrupted balance.

And some claim nothing is happening: the record numbers of people dead are total nonsense, and the word “conspiracy” is thrown around a lot. Hold on for a second. We are obligated by our regulations to explain all of this to you. The message that’s been coming through the megaphones of the universe is clear: the interdimensional bridge is slowly collapsing, and soon transmigration will no longer be possible because Earth has been slipping from the hands of *Homo sapiens*. There’s only one cycle left in the world of human activities — the one of pollution that leads to extinction. However, they’re quite good at ignoring it, so I’d wait if I were you.

Have I understood you correctly? You’re saying it won’t get better and you want to be born to change the world? You’ve been inspired by the pandemic? Ok, we can forget the dolphin thing, but the weather in China has changed dramatically, that’s true. The weather in New Deli, India, has never been fairer — the sky has become blue again. You’re

right in this case. Numbers are what you base your opinion on. The number of particulates – smog, carbon monoxide, dust – has dropped by half. What is more, the levels of nitrogen dioxide have decreased by 72 per cent there. Carbon monoxide emissions have dropped by 88 per cent. This is the data collected by environmental monitoring stations...

The greenhouse effect has been lessened – it's a miracle, isn't it? A true miracle! Let me be honest with you, being an employee in this particular office, I've always felt a peculiar interest in this word. First of all, people call the birth of a child (or, in other words, the transfer of our client into their human body) a miracle. However, the steam engine was also considered a miracle once. Such machines were called miraculous by the new type of workers, who used to repeat the same movement day after day, and thousands of others, similar to them – numerous cogs in the endless factory system, scattered around different parts of the world. A TV is also a miracle because it invites people from thousands of miles away into your living room, where you can listen to their stories. Even the telephone was once a miracle to many, but in this case, not only are you able to listen to somebody's story, but you can tell your own as well. Coming back alive from a war zone is a miracle, finding a way to avoid mobilization is also a miracle, just like a day without a war is. But what do you expect? Numbers will tell you everything.

Too many miracles? Or not enough? The times we're living in are strange – a temporary decrease in pollution nowadays is a bigger miracle than progress in artificial intelligence solutions or travelling to Mars. I really hope there won't come a time when I'll be jobless, as there will be nothing else for me to do. I hope I won't have to sit alone under a starry sky, rolling a cigarette, my gaze fixed on the lifeless fruitless Earth far away, devoid of anything that grows, just spinning in a slow and lonely manner. I hope I won't have to remember all of those who once lived there and feel myself washed over by sadness and astonishment. It's a miracle, how they were able to screw this up entirely.

So, if you're sure about your decision to change the world, I applaud your determination. On the agreed date, you will be issued a new body. Come again, if we're still in business! Goodbye.

GROWING CLOSER THROUGH ISOLATION

NOVELLA

According to a popular opinion, instead of separating people from one another, the lockdown and the isolation that followed it had the opposite effect — it reminded people of what matters and made them closer to their family members. The shocking death rates became a reminder of how fragile time is. The lockdown taught many to spend more time with the ones they love and appreciate them more.

A doorbell rings, a door opens and then closes, and, suddenly, a barefoot boy is standing in the middle of your room. He's wearing grey ragged pyjamas and looks familiar. Having walked towards a blooming poinsettia, the boy understands that Christmas is just around the corner, or maybe it has just ended, or will soon end. His gaze fixed on the view outside your window, the boy just stands there for hours.

Like an ever-changing live painting, the light-filled rectangle in the wall above your bed reveals a kindergarten playground. Nevertheless, you can't quite grasp which year it is now, because the five-year-olds outside, who've been diving in heaps of snow, keep ducking behind the trees, lost in a new game. You can't just simply open the window and yell, "Hey, kids, maybe you know which year it is? We locked ourselves inside in 2020, and tomorrow morning we're about to have a very long conversation, the first of its kind and maybe the last in our entire lives, and we'd like to know where has it brought us to."

The barefoot boy grasps the window handle with all his might, but it doesn't budge. He keeps wiping the window glass until the skin on his palm reddens, the world outside seems so distant in terms of time, but so familiar nonetheless, you might even think that, instead of growing up, the kids outside have hidden somewhere, feeling sudden-

ly scared. The boy keeps slapping the glass with his palm, slap, and one kid jumps up from a bench, slap, another one chases a tabby cat into a gazebo, slap, a group of girls scurry by, we can see their miniature hats down below, slap, the boy smacks his memory, slap, he remembers running down that path and then ducking underneath the balconies to find a glove he'd lost, slap, now his hands are red, just like the hands of the three kids next to a metal swing, who are scratching the frozen ground with leafless sticks. But all of this doesn't help you understand which year it is, because there are no gleaming numbers, dates or time on the screen of your window, even though you've inherited that window from your dad, and he – from your grandma, the window has never been cracked by all the images the previous generations saw through it. You can never know what's actually being broadcasted through that window, as – no matter

6 Lithuania was occupied from 1944 to 1990 by the Soviet Union.

what you actually see – it's not definitive proof that today is happening today. You are standing here, in this room, and in the room, together with you, there's the barefoot boy in his pyjamas, who's grown up during the Soviet times⁶, and all

the other things and the place the boy has come from is somewhere further, not here and now because now there's the lockdown and anguish and hospitals brimming with sick people.

It might be that you learned about the view outside your window and the group of children playing in the yard from your grandma, whose kids – your dad being one of them – as chance would have it, just started kindergarten: the building was quite ordinary, but the teachers who worked there were some of the meanest around, not only were they total slackers, they kept stealing the food meant for kids and hauling it home in bags, can you believe it? So it's only natural that your grandma, being the outstanding mother she was, used to check up on her sons twice a week, peeking through the kindergarten fence. The things she had noticed through her window would have been enough though. You can see that image even now: your dad is standing there with a blue scarf on, one of its ends is almost touching the ground, the other is barely holding on the hood of his jacket, the child's naked neck is showing, and this wide patch of uncovered skin immediately transforms into a pulsating sin of the kindergarten teacher, a catastrophe waiting to happen, when this twenty-

year-old girl with an apron underneath her coat, who is now leaning over a sandbox, is startled by the shrill voice of your grandma – twenty two at the time and already with two kindergarten-age children, and you don't have any kids, the times were different then.

You're watching all of this, unable to recognise any of them: neither your grandma nor your dad, they seem us unreal as the other characters, who have already shed their childlike bodies like snakes. In order to get a better view, the boy in pyjamas stands on his toes, and it is his lips that tell you about how, half a century ago, your grandma stormed into the playground, saying she wanted to bring some old wallpaper she'd found at home for the little ones to draw on, and, "you won't believe this, suddenly I see my kid with a runny nose just standing there, that's why I can't get rid of his constant cough for the life of me, how can he get better when you let him run around outside like that, what the hell are you thinking, I'm not blind, I see the type of people that work here, all you do the entire day is run around back and forth like crazy, carrying buckets of soup and trays with rolls, and the kids are left entirely to their own devices, all the neighbours are talking about it, we will get authorities into this, you'll see, to take damn control of this place, then you'll think twice before letting the kids run around outside almost naked, you damn twat", and after some time that damn twat, without everybody knowing, became my dad's stepmom.

You ask the boy if he can see or hear what's happening now. The teacher, he says, denies ever stealing any food⁷, because she's not even twenty and

⁷ During the Soviet times, there was a huge shortage of everyday

has nobody to take that food to, but there's this other woman who works in the kitchen and does it constantly, as she has four mouths to feed at home, she was doing it secretly at first, but soon started hauling home everything she could get

her hands on, in the same pots, so as not to have a bunch of different dishes to wash later. When the head of the kindergarten found out about this – the teacher kept swearing by all gods to your grandma – nothing happened, the head just asked the thief to do it more discreetly and stop running around the yard with trays and buckets, where other people like you can see her, and you can stop pretending you don't know her, she lives in your apartment building. And then the teacher added, or proudly announced, to be more specific, that she doesn't need to steal anything, as there are

many generous parents, especially fathers, like your husband for instance, who bring her things like bananas, cans of green peas and other stuff, she's even gotten a bag. And then she remembered another incident last winter, it was December or January and the weather was very similar, but she kept certain things about it to herself though: during naptime, she went somewhere, nobody knows where maybe to meet some man or what not, and she left a window open on purpose so that the children sleeping inside would get sick and stay home for the rest of the week. So, your grandma undoubtedly was able to read between the lines and understand what the teacher meant, because model mothers and wives can read the minds of such stuck-up big-eyed girls, and not just for the hell of it, but for a particular reason – to create an opening in time many years into the future and help this barefoot little boy in grey pyjamas step into your room and tell you the story about the divorce of your grandparents. After long months of not seeing each other, this window is a skylight into the past, you finally start talking to each other, and then you suddenly understand why his life is as grey as his pyjamas. We've been so busy; we didn't have time – until now.

Only now, yes, now, you finally remember where you've seen the boy, who is gently caressing the red petals of the plant your mom's sent you through a courier service. Until now, you weren't sure whether Dad would like to tell you all of this himself, but you met him when it was snowing, you were furiously chasing a tabby cat around the yard that day, unable to see anything else around you, but then a new kid joined your group in the kindergarten, and, instead of playing, he kept sobbing. Hugging him, you started to cry as well. This day reminded you of that, but it hasn't helped to understand which year was then and which year is now.

When you hug your dad after not seeing him for a long time, it seems that the long months have turned him back into that barefoot boy, and his heart has softened underneath the weight of several decades, and then you sit together like two kids, and you both cry. But this time no kindergarten teacher would shame him for sobbing, there are no children to laugh at him and call him a cry baby, and nobody is going to forbid all tears whatsoever starting tomorrow. Because once you had to swallow down any lump in your throat, except that one time, after a week or so, when the teacher announced that Khrushchev⁸ had died, what a great leader he was, so everybody was forbidden to laugh that day, we all had to be very sad.

8 Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev (15 April 1894 – 11 September 1971) was the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964 and chairman of the country's Council of Ministers from 1958 to 1964.

So then all of us five-year-olds sat in complete silence and listened to the sirens blaring outside, and I was doing my best to orchestrate that sadness within me. And now, what the hell are people talking about, the times have changed and everything is so great now, except that little thing called the pandemic. Dad, but sometimes it seems that everything's going too fast, and we keep forgetting important stuff because we never have time, we keep losing the connection, something always interrupts it, and we're in a constant vortex of ever-widening gaps, have you thought of it, I didn't know any of this for such a long time, and I've forgotten so many things, but you remember them and still don't want to bother me with it.

Today he's spending the night in your room, as movement to and from different districts in Lithuania has been restricted during the holidays because of the pandemic. It's difficult for him to comprehend how you can manage to live without a TV, but he'll get used to that.

And then he'll walk towards his childhood window and feel surprised why there are so many things he never seemed to have time or chance to tell you about.

MARCH THRICE: 2020 — 2021 — 2022

JOURNAL / AUTOFICTION

16 MARCH 2020

Today is the official start of a lockdown in Lithuania. So, another day was spent at home. I've started wondering how hard it will be for two people to spend so much time in one room – from morning till night – without getting into conflicts about something or trespassing on each other's personal space. I'm wondering how the working from home part will go. By the way, our lease agreement is also coming to an end.

Talked to Mom – she told me that physicians at the clinic have been given one disposable respirator each for emergencies only, and they're most probably not getting any more in the foreseeable future. The clinic's administration claims it's not their responsibility, and the respirators are very hard to get nowadays anyway. Some patients laughed at the physicians for believing in the existence of the coronavirus, in other words – they're stupid to trust the government's propaganda...

Dad's unable to come back from Hungary, his flight's been cancelled. But he thinks it's better that way – to stay in Hungary instead of waiting at the airport and then going through the process of self-isolating in Lithuania. I mean, he'd have to rent an apartment in Vilnius for two weeks then.

It's been almost a month of living with the virus, and we've come to realise that the majority of things are pretty insignificant, they've slipped into a certain memory gap in the emotional sense. I've been feeling kind of weird today – the day seems so long, but then the time just evaporates somewhere. My daily routine, which always used to be chaotic, has become a complete mess, as I can't stop myself from constantly following what's been happening in the world, the news about the virus, various prognoses, etc. Today's Monday, we've ordered some groceries online, but they'll only arrive on Friday. First, I wanted to start complaining about that,

but then almost laughed – is a couple of days without cheese enough of a reason to whine about? So, in short, everything's ok.

16 MARCH 2021 (1 YEAR LATER)

, it seems we're getting that loan after all and soon will be moving into a new home. Today we've filled out all the necessary documents in the bank, no problems with that. As far as I understand, it's easier for married couples with no children and higher education degrees, so my Master's diploma has finally proven to be beneficial. They didn't say anything about our little daughter that's about to come into this world though. We decided to celebrate this unexpected success by eating out.

16 MARCH 2022 (2 YEARS LATER)

Today, in the library, we had the presentation of the book I've translated. The whole event, followed by a true feast, was organised by the Sakartvelo Cultural Centre. We've been invited to come to a literary festival that's going to take place in Tbilisi this fall. Haven't decided yet. Dominick would go together with me, and Mom could take care of the baby while we're gone.

* * * * *

19 MARCH 2020

If nothing changes, compared to just going to classes, we'll have to work twice as hard during the lockdown. We can't get our hands on any books, because the librarians at the university have to spray every one of them with a disinfectant – this helps to prevent the spread of the virus. So if we need some books for our theses, we can only take home a couple and those also have to be approved by our supervisor in writing. Mom's exhausted because of the calls that I've been pouring into the clinic. So we don't talk or text much these days.

19 MARCH 2021 (1 YEAR LATER)

More and more, I keep coming back to the thought that identity is similar to intuition. It's a certain consistent path which could do without distractions and collisions. But that could also pose a threat of limiting yourself extensively, building walls around that would prevent you from seeing the things that are happening outside your alleged personal reality. "People are different". If they're that different, is the inner truth worth to be explicated? And where's the limit – which sentence creates the breaking point? To which point should you keep on talking, and when should you stop in order not to become laughable, like a lion on a circus bike?

19 MARCH 2022 (2 YEARS LATER)

I've emailed some schools in Spain about a possible internship in a Lithuanian school. Did it out of complete desperation, but this fear and horror have become a new normal these days, as each morning I wake up fixated on what's been happening in Ukraine, and this is the last thing I think about before falling asleep. I look at flight tickets online every day. Keep imagining clutching my baby to me, while we run to hide in the basement. How she keeps crying, even though we have to be quiet, and we can't get out, and some neighbour starts yelling at me to shut her up... There are no designated hideouts in Vilnius. You can try to hide in church basements, but, in case of an air-raid warning, we wouldn't be able to reach it in time with a baby in our hands.

* * * * *

20 MARCH 2020

Writing academic papers now seems meaningless. I used to read additional literature for my MA thesis in the manuscript department, as you're not allowed to take documents from the vaults anywhere else. But now I'm not able to do this anymore, so a part of the sources I need for my research is no longer available.

Going through my emails, I sometimes get this feeling that people consider staying at home during the lockdown as succumbing to manipulation: “Let’s fight not only the physical but the mental virus as well!” And maybe this schizophrenic reality is the saddest thing about the lockdown: if you try to stick to the rules, you’re wrong, but if you don’t, you’re one of them.

20 MARCH 2021 (1 YEAR LATER)

Went to the clinic to do some tests. The ultrasound was good, we’re having a girl in September.

20 MARCH 2022 (2 YEARS LATER)

They’ve already reported more than 10 million Ukrainians having left their homes, and this is the biggest refugee crisis in modern history. What’s more, around 800 thousand Russian citizens have already left Russia after it invaded Ukraine, and it’s the biggest emigration wave since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

* * * * *

22 MARCH 2020

Today has been a good day – we’ve made sushi. Small victories. Now that I think about it, it’s strange that we haven’t done it for a long time. If not for the lockdown, we wouldn’t be doing this type of stuff on a day off and going to a bar instead. By the way, I’ve registered as a volunteer at the National Public Health Centre.

22 MARCH 2021 (1 YEAR LATER)

I felt my baby move for the first time! I’ve written my darling daughter a poem.

Name

I imagine you do not like a growing threat
putting on flesh until the X-rays pick it up,
and not like a little red fish in a crystal bowl –

can it be that you're a miracle (I always hear this word),
not a real one, but if, as if it were a question of belief

the belief or knowledge that you are an independent
heart's pulse, viscous dust quickened by lightning

it's not for nothing that we are named after cycles, after
wild grasses and trees (that which turns in a circle,
repeats,
returning without purpose, surpassing all miracles) –

girl's names of rue and bird-cherry, chamomile, fir and
linden,
of storms and mists, mornings, dawns and sunshine

a flash of greening leaves and a sun-truth –
the even flow of reality on the other side of miracles

22 MARCH 2022 (2 YEARS LATER)

It's the twenty seventh day of the war in Ukraine. Director Nikita Mikhalkov, one of Putin's minions, has accused Ukraine and the US of trying to eradicate Russians by infecting birds with viruses. Recently the same nonsense has been repeated by General Konashenkov, the chief spokesperson for the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. Nobody knows though how the infected birds were able to fly only in one direction and spread the viruses exclusively among Russians... 2000 investigations have been started regarding war crimes done by Russian soldiers, among which are rapes and murders of not only adults but kids as well. God, I hate them!

31 MARCH 2020

Even going to a store for groceries has become a challenge, but there are still some professors among those, who coordinate the studies, who send regular emails, urging us to “keep writing”, and reminding us that “the deadlines remain the same”. I have zero motivation. I’ve registered with two different volunteer organisations, but still no news. Maybe, the attempt at volunteering is just a way to avoid my true responsibilities, and not a sincere desire to help control the spread of the virus.

I talked with my grandma on the phone for three hours today. This conversation infused me with strength and reminded me of what matters. Conversations with her are always fun and sad at the same time. Grandma’s hoping to find some old medical facemasks in the closet, as nowadays you can’t find them in any store.

31 MARCH 2021 (1 YEAR LATER)

Oh God, how I wish to be able to go to the seaside to think everything through. The present requires being more organised, and I do comprehend that these essential changes is something I must adjust to, and understand myself anew.

31 MARCH 2022 (2 YEARS LATER)

Going through my old journals now, I see how many things have drastically changed. The happiness of everyday life is so fragile, so precious. Days without a war are the days of bliss. And yet they are given to us for free – like diamonds or manna falling from heaven which you can simply come and gather. And cherish every piece you’ve got. Each day, when all of your loved ones are OK, and no bombs are exploding outside your window. Each day, when you’re not forced to leave your home and hide. Each day, when you have enough food or water, and all your family members are next to you. I used to think that the coronavirus pandemic was going to be the worst thing our generation had to endure. God, how I

was wrong. We all hoped to make up for the lost time afterwards – to travel, and enjoy life and each day. It's been less than two years, and now Ukraine is fighting for the freedom of all Europe. Life is so strange and unpredictable. In the face of war, numerous things lose their perceived value – minor stuff that used to bug us and cause drama seems laughable now. The last several years have taught us a crucial lesson about the meaning of time and the value of life.

LAURA SHEÏLLA INANGOMA

Laura Sheilla Inangoma is a Kirundi, Swahili, and French playwright from Burundi whose plays have been produced in theatres and festivals in various African countries. She presented her work at the Avignon Festival in 2022, and her work seeks to make connections between her ancestral cultural heritage and global contemporary processes and experiences.

LAURA SHEÏLLA INANGOMA

PROJECT AND INTENTION

Project DECONFINEMENT: Breaking spatial confinements and seeking new intercultural mobilities and attitudes in the post—pandemic world. NATIONAL KAUNAS DRAMA THEATRE

To construct storytelling that narrates “the contribution of movement, both physical and mental, to the creation/imagination of other forms of human interaction that would characterise the post—pandemic human, its culture or its new norms, its comfort, and then finally to speculate on how this leads it to a more enticing future.”

The intended questions in the text: What are the new standards to protect life after the epidemic turned into a pandemic? How do we interact in this “global village” without harming each other, objects, and beings? How has the meaning of life (purpose of living) been redefined on this earth after the pandemic? How to *live* this life? What different ways of life or choices should be made for the common welfare? Or “how to create a collective imagination between different cultures of the planet, so that different earthlings hear and feel it, and follow it so that the predicted future is less alarming?”

For this theme, it seemed important to us that the notion of “loss” is part of the background of the theatrical situation that would give substance or life to this theme. Because when you lose (either people, or the freedom to move about as you please, or health security, or the sense of knowledge of self—protection), you lose yourself. And when we lose ourselves (lose the minimal certainties that allowed us to be comfortable fighting for our happiness out there), well, when we lose that, it’s our freedom to “be ourselves” that is being challenged. We need to regain or at least restructure the benchmarks that made our beliefs what they once were or create new ones that are just as highly applicable; to reinvigorate ourselves and activate our survival mechanisms. Therefore, for the author, a grieving family seems close to the situation in the post—pandemic era.

A grieving family is placed at the centre of the story: baffled like the world, which, without planning it, has become isolated from itself. Africa, the greater part of it, was strangely baffled because everything was the same, except for the economic dynamics. The baffled world is like a debarked tree, bleeding with sap but must and can heal only by itself.

The intention is therefore to tell a story that addresses the circumstances of the loss of a loved one (or value) in the collective denial (see the communal irony) of the cause of the loss of this crucial person (or material).

The story takes place in Burundi (while being influenced by conspiracy theories and the rest of the world's events); it is somehow embedded in an ecosystem that is politically in constant search of balance: ideological, historical, and cultural. This can be useful or detrimental in feeding the theme thread, which is: reclaiming one's freedom by redefining one's reference points and balances.

Based on her experience during the epidemic in Burundi (political elections, popular football championship, death of the President of the Republic, etc.), the author will discuss the particularity of her country in the management of this epidemic. She will attempt to put into words the impression that Covid-19 has left on the lives of Burundians and some of the attitudes (general and individual) that result from it.

ADJUSTED MOVEMENTS

SUMMARY:

“Adjusted Movements” is the story of an orphan girl who writes to her dead father in her room where she confines herself, two years after the Covid pandemic. Rather than re-socialising with others, she secretly decides, or rather with her father, to apply for a science scholarship to

accompany a team of astronauts to... Mars! Unaware of the fact, her mother Anésie tries a multitude of tactics to “heal the grief” of her stubborn daughter, relying mostly on the prayer group to regain a sense of solidarity after the family and health tragedy.

ROLES:

Kamikazi Irene: 17 years (in 2022), the only child. Passionate about mathematics and literature, she can switch from the subject of interplanetary migration to that of religious philosophy. After her father’s death, she no longer wants to be part of the community that denied the disease that she believes led to his death. She is angry with everyone and has mixed feelings about her mother, who asserts principles of solidarity. **PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS:** skinny, slim built, black girl with woven hair.

Anésie Kanyana: 51 years old (in 2022), widow. She teaches the Kirundi language at the University of Burundi Kamenge campus and can practice her profession only in her country. Controversies over her husband’s death have driven her into submission to the prayer group, which infuriates her daughter. She believes that the community is the only strength left that will help her raise her teenage daughter. The sense of belonging after her widowhood is vital to her. **PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS:** plump, small, medium height, black female, wears glasses.

Kagabo Simon: 50 years (in 2020), deceased father. A former teacher in engineering at the University of Burundi Kamenge Campus. He was very active in community projects, and national and international conferences and was much sought after for his expertise in different levels of power as well as in civil society. His motto “passing on knowledge is the oldest profession in the world” bound him strongly to his only child. **PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS:** a fan of hats and short-sleeved shirts, slender, black male, wore glasses.

Zamu: old (ageless) family guardian/sentinel.

Keza and Ncuti: Kamikazi’s girlfriends.

Catherine: Academic Agent of the University of Florida.

Prayer group: Five people of mixed age and gender.

*October 2022 — December 2023,
Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.*

PROLOGUE

Anésie speaks, kneeling, with a candle on the floor, and a photo in her hand.

Anésie:

And now, Kagabo? What would seem credible to me? What is vital to us? Important? Crucial? Necessary? Unimaginably valuable? Excessively urgent? Curiously put together, woven, organised, imagined at the centre of our lives, and which we have lost, to the point that our world is closing in? To the point where my world succumbs? You told me it could reopen. (*Pause*) When? Irene, who a few months ago, a few days ago, a few seconds ago, only knew how to laugh at life and its oddities, no longer knows how to laugh. What makes Irene's world come to an end? You said that our universe can still move? How?

She began to fantasise about interplanetary migration. Kagabo, why did you brainwash her with such incongruous dreams? Did you ever think that it would be me who would end up trying to deal with them alone? And that if it doesn't work out the way she wants it to, the way she deserves it to, she'll say it's all my fault? How to cope with the idea of her swallowing her fears about what happened to you? When I try to penetrate her thoughts, she responds briefly with hasty politeness, despite the scars that transform her cheeky nature. Our daughter is in pain. She is suffering and does not wish to tell me anything. Six months after your death, I had an invitation from your brother in Kigali² to come and have a rest with them, but we had to ask for permission to leave the country, to prove that the reason for our exit was essential. Essential, if not of paramount importance. We did not leave. Since then, I haven't seen our little queen leave her room. She refuses to accept the fact that the virus is tightly controlled. She refuses to go back to school, where no one wears a mask anymore. She resents me for teaching. With her, I looked for ways to connect online with her teachers, we were able to convince the Ministry of Education to let her take her online test, and she passed with flying colours, but how does that

² Capital of Rwanda

reassure, when the human no longer believes in his or her kind? Should I... think about getting her some therapy? I think I did everything, I brought her girlfriends, but she wouldn't talk to them, I suggested they go out and have fun, it could even have been in Rumonge³, for a weekend, just the girls, I thought she would find it relaxing, she told me firmly that her father wouldn't like it. I tried your stubbornness—testing speech, saying that Asia, where it all started, was amazed at Africa's handling of the disease, and that in Europe all they talk about is the war in Ukraine, that they had to stop with their self—confidence, that we have other ways of doing things in Africa, and that it was working. You should have seen the look on her face. But no word from her mouth, nothing. And now, Kagabo? What should I do? What is crucial? For your Kamikazi... Help me. I need you. Please.

} Province du Burundi

SCENE 1: LITTLE QUEEN

Warm, beige lights in a three—metre square room (3mx3m) light up gradually, slowly, as this audio is played/rhythmically handled in the “tiny darkness” by someone in the room.

Stereo system: The government's initial response to the pandemic included the suspension of all inbound and outbound passenger flights, a 14—day self—funded quarantine for passengers from affected countries, and a call for security forces to help enforce hygiene and sanitation measures in public places. But the government statement on 25th March recalls that “only the grace of God has protected Burundi from COVID—19 and threatens those who take preventive measures before the government.”

The light spreads over a small wooden cupboard in the left corner of the back wall. There is a set of imvutano⁴ hanging there.

4 Traditional dresses for women in Burundi, Rwanda, and a certain community in Uganda.

There is a shoe cabinet in the corner next to the cupboard, containing five pairs of trainers, most of them dark, even black. A teenage girl, Kamikazi, lies on a small bed draped in white, with a notebook and a closed laptop beside her. She presses the back button on the stereo system, and presses “play”.

Stereo system: “(...) a government communiqué on 25th March recalls that “only the grace of God has protected Burundi” from Covid–19 and threatens those who take preventive measures before the government (...).”

The bed is in a horizontal position, it measures 1.40 m, red flip–flop sandals lie on the floor in front of the bed and there is a small fan spinning slowly to the left. There is a collection of photos on one corner of the wall that is not clearly visible.

Stereo system: “Unfortunately, there are journalists who only promote poverty in the country. Some still say that COVID–19 is raging in Burundi, that all hospitals in Burundi are full of COVID–19 patients, and that the pandemic is taking many lives. Don’t they promote poverty?”

“But he calls himself an international journalist. He is Burundian. How is it that one hates the country where one grew up?”

Across the stage (or on a superimposed stage) whitish lights come from outside, where the mother, Anésie, is on the outdoor terrace. The stereo system plays as the lights turn on her gradually.

Stereo system: (*various and distant voices*) “(...) the gods or the devils had nothing or anything to do with your failures (...); “(...) the notion of fatalism denies man’s freedom of choice: it had to happen, and it must happen (...); “Is this a theocracy or not? If we put almost everything “in the hands of God”, when even Italy, which has Rome, the centre of the Catholic faith, or Saudi Arabia, which has Mecca, the centre of the Muslim faith, do not do so... We risk falling straight into (...); “(...) government spokesman declared that God himself, mandated by the Constitution, was going to protect Burundi from Covid–19 (...); “(...) redistributing responsibilities lightly (...); “(...) hostile feelings towards him. It looks like a public, repetitive lynching (...)”

She is sitting on an outdoor chair, with glasses on, with her elbows resting on an outdoor table, and checking her students’ exam sheets. She hears snippets from Kamikazi’s room.

She is surrounded by green plant pots, including a banana tree.

In the warmly lit room, Kamikazi ditches the stereo system and writes in a resonant “voice in her head”.

Kamikazi: 17 December 2022.

Da⁵, I refused to celebrate Christmas this year. I am faithful to our theory of refraining from consumption at these parties, which are distant from who we are, and where we foolishly empty our wallets for things even further from what we need,

§ Diminutive of “Dawe” which is “My Daddy” or “Daddy of mine”

to the delight of the shopkeepers, who are even further from our national fund. I don’t want to wear this stupid *Mvutano* to go and admire the All Great All Powerful All Saviour Body painted in the Church. He hasn’t done much for you. Nor for me, for that matter. So why does Mum... get lost in it? She says... She... It would have pleased Mom... For me to be part of *her* Christmas. She tells me that she has put up a “sort of Christmas tree” in the living room. It is the banana tree sprout near our terrace. I had seen her pull it out of the soil from my window. She says that she has hung lights on it and that she is happy to see them go on and off cheerfully. She says it makes her feel less lonely... She also says that it makes the living room look alive. No, she used the word “inhabited”. She says that the living room at least looks *inhabited*.

Confronted with my silence... I don't know what state I was in... Confronted with my confusion, she ended up saying that I was missed in the living room. I think she means that she misses my presence in the living room. I am ashamed, Da. I really, really wish I could be more eloquent with Mum, she has been putting up with so much from me, or rather, she has resigned herself, but I don't know how to talk to her. Maybe if she keeps trying... Just yesterday she tried a little "innocent" trick to lure me into the hallway. She screamed and suddenly fell silent. For a long moment. A very long moment. Naturally, I was worried, I called her. She did not answer. I said to myself, "the sly one". I paused the laptop and the fan to listen carefully and locate where she was in the house. If she moved again, even with a single breath, I knew I could hear her. You know that my hearing has always been impeccable! Yes, Da, remember, I was always the first one to run and open the door for you when you came home late at night after your community events! I knew that Zamu⁶ whose snoring kept me from finishing my equations was not going to move the gate so quickly. In addition, the Bikoti⁷ were still wreaking havoc in the area. And you

6 Diminutive of "Umuzamu":
Guardian/sentinel

7 "Long coats": Brigands, bandits
in the city of Bujumbura nick-
named "Long Coats" because they
hid their weapons in them.

8 "Ha-ha! You blew it, Mom" or
"Ugh, you played yourself, Mom!"

remember, every time you were worried about me opening so late, you asked me if I knew the expression "having an ear to the ground". Well, this time, even after pausing the laptop and the fan, I heard nothing. I had forgotten who my mother was. I quickly thought of running to see if she had slipped, lifeless, in your shower... In *her* shower, when her allergy cough gave her away. It must have been somewhere in the rice

stock. If it was like before, I would have said something like "Yooo, birakunoye ma"⁸! Hahah... (*Pause*) But it's not like that anymore. I'm glad I can write to you today because even though I rarely leave my room, you know I don't have much time. You can see the number of online study programmes now, thousands! At least that. After you passed away, I never thought I'd say this: this is the good thing that the coronavirus has brought us. I know you would say to me "have you forgotten the beer?" but no. The only good thing about this virus is the extent of digital. So, I'm happy to tell you that I know what I'm going to choose as an academic course. Don't blame me for not doing engineering anymore. I'm going to enrol in science and technology. With that good news, I leave you with a glass of lukewarm water for your voice. Sing well, Da!

Kamikazi closes her notebook and opens her laptop. On the other side of the stage, Anésie gets up, disappears from the terrace, and appears in Kamikazi's room. She closes her laptop. They look at each other for a moment.

Anésie: Are you okay?

Kamikazi: Yes, thank you.

Anésie smiles at her and returns to the terrace. Sitting on the outside chair, she looks towards the audience, sad, and bows her head. In the bedroom, Kamikazi reopens her notebook. She writes. Voice in her head.

Kamikazi: Da, I don't know how to break the news to Mom. How am I going to share with her that I will study online and that I will not go to the University of Burundi?

Pause.

Kamikazi: What do you think of this version... I could make the effort to go to the living room just to announce the news. She might be marking student papers as usual. Then I see myself telling her...

Kamikazi looks up to the ceiling. The lights change to light blue. The actresses face each other.

Kamikazi: I applied for a Science and Technology scholarship in Florida.

There is a pause when the mother looks at the daughter with curiosity.

Kamikazi: I have completed the online interviews...

Anésie: I thought you wanted to do engineering like your...

Kamikazi: It is almost the same thing.

Silence. The mother looks to the left.

Kamikazi: I will need you to sign the parent forms.

Another pause.

Anésie: (*in a subdued voice*) Can you take time to reflect on it again?

Silence.

Kamikazi: I will be able to do it online. I'm not going to leave, and it's a scholarship.

Pause.

Anésie: Irene, I want to know when you're planning to come out of your room... What can I do to make you feel safe outside your room?

Kamikazi: I don't want to complicate a situation that is already complicated, Mom. I'm fine like this.

Silence.

Kamikazi: I may have to travel to receive my diploma. One of the candidates was rejected for saying he would not be able to go there because he did not intend to be vaccinated.

Anésie: What about you?

Kamikazi: I am admitted. Well, almost.

Anésie: Are you vaccinated?

Kamikazi: Yes.

Anésie: I didn't know that...

Kamikazi: I know.

Pause

Anésie: I see.

Kamikazi: I did it first, I think. When Dad was under the machine. They did it without asking because they knew we had Covid.

Pause

Kamikazi: It is therefore urgent. I'll bring you the forms.

Blue lights go out. Warm lights in Kamikazi's room. She is on the bed, writing. Voice in her head.

Kamikazi: Not typically my mother, is it? Don't you think so, Da? She usually has the upper hand. I would see her asking me a series of questions. Don't you think? Something like that...

Light blue lights, Anésie has forms that are in her hand. Kamikazi is in front of her. In the next interaction, Anésie reads and speaks at the same time.

Anésie: When did you start the application process?

Kamikazi: Scholarships were announced in February. So...
ten months ago.

Anésie: Did you prepare the files by yourself?

Kamikazi: Yes.

Anésie: What about errands in the administrative offices?

Kamikazi: I waited in line like everyone else.

Anésie : *(looking her in the eye)* Did you go out?
Silence.

Anésie: I could have helped you...

Kamikazi: I know.

Anésie: How did it go?

Kamikazi: All the stamps and signatures are there. **Anésie:** Yes, it's all there. I mean during your wait... **Kamikazi:** What do you want to know?

Silence.

Anésie: Didn't you get any derogatory remarks?

Kamikazi: Zamu did the face—to—face for me.

Anésie cracks a smile.

Anésie: You are your father's daughter.

Kamikazi stands her ground.

Kamikazi: Is the interrogation over?

Blue lights off. Warm lights in Kamikazi's room.

Kamikazi: Hmh... I think I have a problem with my mom.

She... She doesn't understand me. And I don't understand her. That's why it's difficult, I can't talk to her the way I want to, with the pain I feel, because she wants everything to be like it was before. Do you see? She forgets a lot of things. And I don't want to forget. If I forget, if I take everything as lightly as before, I think I will lose everything, as I have lost you. I think I would lose her.

*Kamikazi stops and erases the last sentence.
Voice in her head (emotional).*

Kamikazi: Sorry for the corrections. If I wrote you on my laptop, there would be no corrections, but also no authenticity. I was writing that if I took everything as lightly as before, I would lose everything, as I lost you. But I was straying from the subject because I was trying to figure out the best way to tell Mom – who thought I'd be going to university with her every morning – that I was not going. I want to study online, and stay at home, but still have the best courses in the world. Maybe if I said it like that, she'd go for it? Hmh... Knowing her, she may block it at the start. I'm afraid I would lose my patience, Da.

Light blue lights. Anésie, after examining the forms, looks at her daughter.

Anésie: Do you want to..(She takes a breath.) Are you aware of what it says?

Kamikazi: Are we going to talk about “awareness”, Mum?
Pause.

Kamikazi: Sorry... Yes, Mum. I have read what is written. And I want to sign up.

Anésie: Do you know if there are other African women registered?

Kamikazi: I don't know. I don't care.

Silence.

this?

Anésie: Have you talked to another family member about

Kamikazi: Like who?

Anésie: One of your paternal uncles, for example.

Kamikazi: Not. My life is none of their business.

Anésie: Kamikazi...

Kamikazi: (whispering) Call me “Irene”, please.

Anésie: It’s been over a year. Irene... Please... **Kamikazi:** I beg you. Stop it. (In a weak voice) please... **Anésie:** Look at me.

Anésie: Please.

Pause.

Kamikazi keeps her eyes down.

Long silence.

Anésie: What is it that interests you?

Kamikazi: (blowing her nose) Having the best courses in the world in science... Technology.

Anésie: Yes, but why? You could do it...

Kamikazi: Facing up. Not running away from what threatens our world.

Anésie: Why do I feel otherwise?

Kamikazi: Maybe because you wear judgemental glasses...

Anésie takes off her glasses.

Anésie: All right? What are you going to do with this degree?

Kamikazi: Make analyses for universal exploration machines. Be useful to NASA.

Anésie: NASA?

Kamikazi: Yes, you know, the most fact-based team, whose work is based on figures, scientific data, cause and effect, logic. Not on prayers.

Anésie: If you want to imply things without pointing them out, you fail to do so. If you want us to have a constructive discussion, you'll have to be clearer about your intentions because I don't understand you.

Pause

Kamikazi: All right. Let's say, dear Mom, that at least one of us chooses to survive conscientiously. I don't care if your colleagues or neighbours or anyone else comes back and tells you that you should do something for me, implying that I'm weird. I refuse to play the misunderstood one. I know what I want, it's clear in my head, and I understand myself.

She moves away from her mother. Pause.

Kamikazi: I don't want to continue to play hide and seek with this community that has neglected and mocked people's health as it has happened to Dad.

Anésie: It's OK.

Kamikazi: But they are always there to bury them. Ibimazi vyari vyuzuye⁹, isn't it? Is this how you pay for your fuel when you go out?

⁹ Funeral contributions

Anésie: Enough is enough.

Kamikazi: And then they come here and whisper to you about the poor girl who doesn't come out of her room anymore, "The poor girl is depressed"! I am not depressed. I survive conscientiously.

Kamikazi quickly approaches her mother, only an inch away, and she whispers to her.

Kamikazi: It gives them a sense of superiority to come and judge orphans and advise widows on what is none of their business. Don't you think, Mom, you're doing them a great favour in terms of their self-esteem?

Anésie: (firmly) Kamikazi, stop!

Light blue lights go out. Warm lights in Kamikazi's room as she writes.

Kamikazi: Hmh... I'm glad, but Mom would be... I'm invading her personal space. A slap wouldn't catch me off guard... Maybe if I spoke to her more gently, Da? Or still with anger, but not at her, rather at others. Perhaps this approach would make her realise that we are being manipulated by these vultures of doom. Point them out. They are against us...

Light blue lights. Kamikazi three metres away from her mother; in a serene and emotional voice.

Kamikazi: Barely a year in, and everyone is acting as if nothing had happened. They have forgotten. As if life hasn't changed dramatically since Dad left. As if he had been blown away by an unknown wind as if it were normal, or worse, as if it were a legitimate death. As if, for them too, death seemed to have chosen the wrong person, but then, very soon afterwards, and in a way, his death, how it happened, his illness, how he was treated, all as if it were normal! They understand

Dad's death. As if it wasn't serious anymore. They even say that it is God's will! (*Shouting*) God, my ass!

The mother leaves for the terrace, Kamikazi does not follow her. The lights on the terrace change from whitish to light blue. The two actresses speak through a wall.

Kamikazi: What?

Anésie: In the end, it is better to lock yourself in your room.

Silence.

Kamikazi: It's not like my ass is a dirty thing!? It stood its ground on the thankfully uncomfortable benches of the waiting room when Dad was waiting to die. My ass also served well on the oh—so—comfortable chair that was next to the bed where Da was dying, or rather next to the big breathing machine we were so lucky to have! We must have felt so privileged to have had this rare machine decorating the room. And my ass was watching this, helplessly brave! What about God, Mom, is He?

Warm lights in Kamikazi's room. She writes on the bed.

Kamikazi: Of course, Da, I would immediately make the sign of the cross and say, "Sorry Lord".

10 The parts where Kamikazi looks up to the ceiling can be interpreted as a moment of reflection before she returns to the letter she is writing to her father.

Kamikazi looks up to the ceiling¹⁰. Kamikazi pressed to the wall. Anésie also has her back pressed against the wall. She listens to her daughter with her eyes closed.

Kamikazi: Mom, you downplayed the virus by letting all those people get close to Dad. You let them touch his weak hands with their

sweaty ones, as if nothing had happened, Mum. You let the priests, the uncles, the politicians, the cousins, the activists, your colleagues, the neighbours, everyone touch him! But you shouldn't have touched each other. You let his sisters kiss him. When we shouldn't have been kissing. You let them cuddle him, zero centimetres distant from his struggling body when we should not have been cuddled, and you allowed them to breathe out on him with their mouth breaths into his vulnerable nostrils, you saw them talking to him without masks, when they should have been wearing masks. It was medically mandatory, Mom. You let them come when we should have been isolated.

11 Sweet potato leaves

12 Small aubergines

Light blue lights go out. The whitish lights on the terrace turn on. Anésie, sitting with corn dough and two small dishes Isombe¹¹ and Intore¹², calls from the terrace.

Anésie: Irene? Don't you want to come to dinner?

Kamikazi in the warm lights of her room. She drops the notebook on the floor, sits down on the bed, and covers her face with both hands. She suddenly stands up and approaches the door of her room.

Kamikazi: (*firmly*) No. (*Pause*) Thank you. *She returns to her notebook. She writes.*

Kamikazi: Da, I would never say such things to the love of your life. But since you died, it has changed a lot.

SCENE 2: THE IRONY OF FATE

19 December 2022. Anésie enters Kamikazi's room. When Anésie speaks, Kamikazi turns off the stereo system she is playing; speeding up and slowing down her rhythm, changing the bass of the compiled and cut voices.

Stereo system:

"I am worried because we are not protected. Often..."

"We are afraid, but we can't talk about it."

"The number of confirmed cases is much lower than what..."

"The discovery of the first three confirmed cases of COVID-19 – this is very common, and testing is very rare."

"I am worried because we are not protected... Often,"

Often patients die without being tested – "There is not enough space for all patients." "Some prisoners are supposed to be quarantined, But they still move freely in the prison"

"I am worried because we are not protected... Often," "I am worried because we are not protected... Often,"

Anésie: Have you eaten?

Kamikazi: Yes.

Anésie: Neza¹³... Do you want to talk?

13 Good.

Kamikazi: As you wish.

14 Mountainous regions of Burundi

Anésie: (amused) I was going through your father's things to...

Kamikazi: Yes?

Anésie: Another year. So much has happened.

Silence.

Anésie: Do you want to watch it together? To commemorate as a family...

Silence.

Anésie: Look... I found this, among your father's things. You write: (*reading from an A4 paper*) "This is Kamikazi to tell you about the strange world we live in now. But first, let me introduce myself." Do you remember this?

Kamikazi: I used to write polemics like that every week...

Anésie: You say "My name is Kamikazi, which means *Little Queen*, I can't explain the pejorative, because my kingdom is big; I am a queen of the Lake, the deepest in the world if we want to forget Baikal because everybody wants to forget everything that is attached to Russia, thanks to the war in Ukraine, but don't be afraid, freedom will win." Ah!

Kamikazi: A long sentence for a presentation.

Anésie: And not finished! "I am a Tanganyika girl, born in the Imbo plain, from the beautiful mountains of Mugamba¹⁴, the mountains of the cows, the milk cows, the meat cows, the compost cows, yes, in my kingdom, we praise the cows, the fresh air, the meadows, and the coolness. Imagine that in my kingdom of the open air, there is a rumour about locking people up. What a funny world!" And your father corrected with...

Kamikazi: Can you please stop?

Anésie gives her the paper.

Anésie: Of course. Here. It will reconnect you with your humour. We need this.

Kamikazi: I don't know.

Anésie: It's been over a year, Irene. Two years today.

Kamikazi: I knew it.

Anésie: Tell me...

Kamikazi: I knew you would say "it's been over a year" rather than "it's only been two years".

Silence.

Kamikazi: It's all rubbish in this paper.

Anésie: We'll have to stop hanging on to a broken thread, my dear. It's hard to turn a beautiful page, you'd like to read it over and over again, but for a sense of accomplishment, you can only continue the whole book. That is all we can do. If only for you. Your future. Are you thinking about it? What are you going to do with your life if you refuse to leave your room?

Kamikazi: I learn from my laptop.

Anésie: Wouldn't you like to go out? You will have to work with teams at some point. Wouldn't you like to see your girlfriends, for a start?

Kamikazi: I will think about it when the time comes.

Anésie: Kamikazi...

Kamikazi: "Irene" suits me, Mom...

Silence.

Anésie: All right. I'm going. I'm going to close the main door if you don't want to go out.

Kamikazi: Still to your church?

Anésie: Yes, the house of the Lord. I know it's not worth asking you to come with me.

Silence.

Anésie: When I leave, please come out of your room, and close it. It would be the last straw if some rascal came in when you are home alone.

Kamikazi: Zamu is not here?

Anésie: He went home yesterday to celebrate with his family.

Kamikazi: You can leave the key with me.

Anésie: Good.

Anésie leaves. Kamikazi takes the paper and reads, gloomily.

Kamikazi: "(...) We live from day to day, and we are asked not to go out to work. And what for? Because apocalyptic news is coming from Europe. Since last week, Europeans have been dropping like flies! But today the expression should be "falling like Chinese". Come on, come on, calm down, it's just a joke. So, what am I talking about, I'm talking about a virus in the air we breathe. Hmh; when you put it that way, it sounds like it's over for the Earth. In any case, that of the West. If you want my personal opinion...

Knocking on the door outside; she pauses. No noise. She returns to her reading.

Kamikazi: Nanana... “I will tell you that we Africans should not worry. My heart tells you that for once, Africa can say “poor Europe”. Isn’t that funny? We should share our little forest potions with them so that their civilisations don’t die out; I tell you; according to the news we read, there are no more grandmothers in Italy, no more grandfathers in China, it’s a catastrophe. But let our governments understand, the decolonisation of minds starts precisely from reason.” How old was I last year? “The realities in Europe are not those in Africa. In reality, we can allow ourselves to listen to the most popular madman of the “shitty world”, whom we will call Don—the—Trump, who says “It will disappear, one day it is like a miracle, it will disappear”. But in our country? Zero cases, except for foreigners.” Was I trying to be ironic? “My sincere sympathy to the grandchildren without grandparents, but at least you don’t have to go to school!” Wow. “Take advantage of the unexpected holidays, all African students are jealous! For finalists like me, there is no way out. The only “corona” you will get is the Toyota that will drive you to school tomorrow. Haha! Ciao bella, that was *Little Queen*.”

Kamikazi looking ahead.

Kamikazi: “Don—the—Trump”

Perched voice: Psst!

Outside.

Kamikazi: The door!

*Kamikazi looks at the voice.
Kamikazi is hiding.*

Second Stamped Voice: (*lower*) We saw you, Irene!

Kamikazi stays where she is hidden.

Perched voice: She doesn't want to see us. **Stamped voice:**
(to *Kamikazi*) Hey! That's us. **Perched voice:** Keza and Ncuti.

Silence.

Perched voice (Ncuti): Can you come to the terrace,
please?

Second voice (Keza): So, the rumour is true.

Ncuti: Hello?

Keza: We miss you.

Ncuti: Show yourself at least?

Keza: We just want to talk to you for two minutes.

Ncuti: She is no longer there.

Keza: If you are still here, at least listen to us. We're going
to talk into the void.

Ncuti: I don't want to mope around in the void. I will come
back better. Let's go.

Keza: I didn't come to go back empty-handed, Ncuti.
I will say what brought me here.

Ncuti: (whispering) What if her mother comes back when
we tell her everything? I don't want to...

Keza: Okay, go ahead and leave!

Ncuti: Are you coming?

Keza: No. (to the empty space) Listen Irene (Ncuti takes two steps towards the exit).. I think you're not being nice to us (Ncuti stops).

Kamikazi looks up to where they are, still in hiding.

Keza: How long is it? More than a year since we don't see you at all. The last time was just after your father's funeral. You were so cold to me, that I wondered what I had done to you. I was so humiliated, so offended that I didn't even ask what was going on, I was afraid I had been a bitch to a "fresh orphan". I didn't want to hear what I might have done wrong; I would never have forgiven myself. Months have passed since the neighbourhood said you don't leave your house. That you are angry with the whole world? So, I'm here for you to tell me that by yourself. That it's not my fault you don't talk to me, but it's all your fault. That I have done nothing to deserve this. You're going to tell me, so I'll stop thinking about what I might have done wrong. Because it hurts, you know? I'm done and waiting.

Silence.

Ncuti: Let's go, Keza, this might not be the right time.

Keza: Is that how it is? Irene? Do you think it will happen like that? Are you going to throw us out like soiled menstruation pants?

Silence.

Keza: How long will it take for you? Haven't you been given enough time, Irene?

Silence.

Keza: You are stubborn! And selfish. (time) Intolerant! Arrogant. Not nice!

Ncuti: There is no point, Keza. Let's go.

They leave. Kamikazi listens to them leave, then hurriedly closes the door, and returns to her room. She articulates what she writes.

Kamikazi: Da... Da! I'm... I have rabies. I... I don't know how we... They are... Why, when... It's me... It's them! It is they who... Not as they refuse my pain. What do they want? Da... They come on the day of your death. Do they realise it? Mom is at her prayer group. Zamu must be buying his family nice clothes for Christmas. And I... I am...

Call from her laptop. It takes a while before she picks up.

Academic Agent (A.A): Good afternoon. Miss Irene Kamikazi?

Silence.

Academic Agent: Here is the University of Florida for Miss Irene Kamikazi, hello?

Kamikazi: Yes?

A.A: I am Catherine, one of the Academic Agents of the University of Florida, good morning.

Kamikazi: Afternoon...

Catherine: Would you be available for a short visual assessment for your ongoing Sciences' Scholarship Admission, please?

Kamikazi: Uuh... Excuse me for a second, please.

Catherine: Sure!

Kamikazi goes to check her notebook, she seems to panic, but dives into the small wooden cupboard and takes a shirt that she puts on top. She hurriedly sits down on her small desk with her laptop.

Kamikazi: I think I've been confused with the schedule. I thought our next meeting was to be on the 27th, for the signed papers first.

Catherine: Yes, this assessment is supposed to be a surprise, we are supposed to ask you questions, unprepared.

Kamikazi: All right? Okay... I didn't... May I ask about the importance of the unpreparedness? I thought everything was communicated... Sorry for asking.

Catherine: No, you have the right to do so. One of the most valuable virtues from the students that we recruit for special missions such as this one is to be "always ready". I am supposed to share with you my identification for your reassurance towards my role within the university; you are expected to provide transparent answers about your qualifications for this scholarship award, and you are expected also to provide a number of answers for subtle interrogations supposed to assess your mental health. So, Miss Irene Kamikazi, this is my identification, you're allowed to take a screenshot for further details from the University...

Kamikazi takes a picture.

Kamikazi: Okay...

Catherine: Now, are you ready?

Catherine: Sorry, should I go on?

Silence.

Kamikazi: Yes, of course, I am always, always ready.

Catherine: Okay. Let's start with your background. What did you study?

Kamikazi: Well, I... Uhm. Excuse me again, please. I just need a glass of water. I just had a hard conversation with some of my friends... Well, I thought they were friends. I just need to cool down.

Catherine: Sure! I'll wait.

Kamikazi takes a bottle of water from beside her bed and returns to the desk.

Catherine: That was nearby! Well... Right. What do you think we first talk about the conversation you just had with your friends? Would that help cooling down?

Silence.

Catherine: For instance, what was hard in it? And how do you handle the hardships of your life?

Kamikazi: It's nothing to do with how I handle the challenges of my life, my friends don't understand my choice of not going out, I just lost my father; and... Since I was refused to go where we used to have holidays with him, I haven't had yet the occasion to say proper "Goodbye" to him.

Catherine: I am sorry for the loss of your father.

Kamikazi: That's... Kind.

Silence.

Kamikazi: I...

Catherine: When was that? Sorry. I interrupted you.

Kamikazi: No, it's me. Uhm... My father passed away on

DECEMBER THE 19TH, 2020.

Catherine: This is your second anniversary of...

Kamikazi: Yes.

Catherine: I'm sorry. Are you sure you want to carry on?

Kamikazi: Yes, please.

Catherine: Really? Because some of the questions are quite...

Kamikazi: Please, I am home alone, my mother... We don't do things together, and my friends just sit around on the couch. I think that this call is one of the best things today.

Catherine: Okay. Let's continue, then. First, to be sure, your demand for scholarship is on the program which supports and accompanies the project of simulation of life on Mars. Is that right?

Kamikazi: Yes.

Catherine: Perfect. We will start back, and I'll start recording. Miss Irene Kamikazi, what is your studies' background?

Kamikazi: I did Preschool, and Primary school in a Roman Catholic Program... Traditional didactic method of education. I had good grades in the State's General Test named "Concours National". In Secondary school, I was at the Jesuits' and did sciences in the superior cycle.

I participated in a Para scholar competition named “Genies en Herbes” which means literary “budding geniuses” it was a general knowledge competition, general culture based. Besides that, in the three last years of my secondary school, I have participated in very insightful debates on political policies and community-oriented solutions for development. I think it is what shaped my mind.

Silence.

Catherine: Thank you, what about your surroundings’ empowerment?

Kamikazi: My father used to introduce me to philosophers’ ideas and ancient books of Egypt about how societies organize for their survival but mostly for public order. My father was a water engineer who used to tell me stories about how people’s lives were endangered because of a few people’s and multinationals’ greediness. He told me that we needed honest technicians and scientists here, to reveal and refuse those greedy people’s and multinationals’ power during the project’s planning and processes. That’s when I started thinking about being an engineer myself.

Catherine: And what changed your ambition?

Kamikazi: Nothing. I am convinced that being part of a team that will think about new ways of surviving will help me change that dream into reality and honour it.

Catherine: Hm. Thank you. So, what is the most meaningful experience encountered in life that shaped your character today? And how?

Kamikazi: I have grown up in dictatorships where I was asked to not ask many questions as a child, I have lived through one civil war and heard on the radio when I was 9 years old how rebels were advancing in the economic capital where I was and that they were targeting people like my family; I have also participated in a manifestation judged

illegal but so fair to the Burundians, I heard a lot about the HIV, malaria, and Ebola in my community but nothing has happened so close to me as the Covid 19. None of those things had taken a member of my family that I was counting on, such as my father. At the beginning of COVID–19, I was laughing about Donald Trump – one of the dictators I was talking about – in one of the articles that we wrote every week, me and Dad, I hadn't realized yet how those people were dangerous. When Dad was under the machine assisting him to breathe, I learned to live under that cloud of taboos. About how it has affected my family. The government was saying that week that there were no cases, and I have learned, while suffering from fear, how to act like I am coping with the situation in a way that I don't endanger myself. That experience helped me to know where to share information, where not to, and how to act in shadow but practically and efficiently. Subtle revolution, as my father called it.

Catherine: Thank you. Next, I have to ask you if ever you're aware of several things in the project. Yes?

Kamikazi: Okay.

Noises are coming from the terrace, Anésie calls Irene, accompanied by five people.

Anésie: Irene! I am back.

Kamikazi: Excuse me please, that's my mother. I'll have to open the door for her.

Kamikazi runs to open the door for Anésie. She is accompanied by 5 people.

Anésie: You see, my daughter has left her room! One should not listen to rumours.

Kamikazi stares at her mother, horrified, and runs to her room.

Anésie: Irene! Take a seat on the terrace, I'll be back with glasses of water. You may begin the prayer.

The five: Amen, sister in Christ.

In the next part, the group of six will sing in the chorus as the rest of the interview closes.

Anésie: (at her daughter's door) Irene, can I talk to you, please?

Kamikazi: I'll finish my interview and get back to you,

Mom. *(To the laptop)* We can continue, please.

As Anésie offers to drink, the chorus begins to chant "Psalm 145 — Sing, O my soul, the praise of the Lord!" This will fit in with the interview in a layered rhythm.

Catherine: Are you aware that the NASA projects, even though inclusive and international— that is why you'd participate academically— only recruit non-smoking Americans from 30 to 55 years old with degrees in mathematics, physics, biology, or engineering, intending to depart to Mars in 2024?

Kamikazi: Yes.

Choir Singing.

Catherine: Could you tell me the project's name, please?

Kamikazi: ARTEMIS.

Choir Singing.

Catherine: Are you aware that this will require the people participating in it to be able to live independently, manipulate robots, solve technical problems, and move around with spacesuits? Kamikazi: Yes Madam.

Choir Singing.

Catherine: What do you know about the devices that are being developed to send astronauts there?

Choir Singing.

Kamikazi: I have read about Orion and the Space Launch System and their recent success but nothing specific.

Catherine: Thank you. Therefore, I won't have to ask you about the first mission of this year. What about the workplace?

Kamikazi: The engineers are supposed to reproduce the conditions of an extra-terrestrial mission in Texas, to the space centre of Nasa.

Catherine: Okay but that said recruits will be in Florida.

Choir Singing.

Catherine: Last but not least; the volunteers will be confined for one year, under the watchful eye of the American government agency, which will endeavour to scrutinize their every move. They will live in a kind of prefab of One hundred and fifty square meters. What is your comment on that?

Kamikazi: They will need that, and we are all trained to confinement by this virus. I need to be alone, so the confinement suits me well.

Choir Singing.

Catherine: Okay, do you think that you wouldn't need any social needs?

Kamikazi: To go for six months in the space is not for people who need socialization to feel fulfilled. It takes another kind of alpha human who can override this primate need to socialize, so badly to the point of harm.

Choir Stops.

Catherine: Hmh. Don't you think that nonetheless, confinement "is" and "should" be a constraint for a normal person?

Kamikazi: I am much safer by myself.

Pause.

Catherine: Thank you for taking the assessment, I will send you the written version right now for your signature, and the recording tape should follow as a link on your email. We are still waiting for your parental approval and will get back to you as soon as the committee resumes your file. Any questions you have?

Kamikazi: No, thank you. I will be glad to hear from you. I hope I did well.

Catherine: Crossing fingers for you, best of luck! Goodbye!

SCENE 3: NUMBERS FIRST

Still 19 December 2022.

Anésie knocks on Kamikazi's room door.

Anésie: Are you finished?

Kamikazi: I need to print, sign, and scan a document.

Anésie: All right. Would you like to join us for a special prayer afterwards? For your Father's Day?

Kamikazi: Please, Mom.

Anésie enters and closes the door. The prayer group approaches to follow the conversation.

Anésie: These people have come for us, Irene.

Kamikazi: You think I didn't notice that you were scheming about the key? I bet it was you who forced Zamu to take time off work so that your little act would succeed. That I come to open up to you and your entire prayer delegation?

Anésie: No, not really. Okay, a little. Zamu doesn't have enough days off.

Kamikazi: I didn't think you'd go and set me up.

Anésie: Irene, you don't talk to me. Our family has no access to you. I don't know what to do with you anymore. These people go out of their way to show their support, and they've just come to see you. Please come and say hello for just five minutes.

Kamikazi: I don't think I owe these people anything. I don't know them.

Anésie: But they do. They say your name in every prayer. They think of you, they pray for us, and they are there when I need their company. They are generous with their time (*the group at the door consents*). This should not be taken for granted. (*The group at the door consents loudly*).

Kamikazi: So why don't you stay with them? Why are you forcing me to be part of something that does not concern me? You have found a new family. So, stay there.

Anésie: We need each other to recreate a life without your father.

Kamikazi: These are the people who killed him! He died for them, as you will die for them. You speak of “social suicide” without realising that you are committing suicide on your own! Da sacrificed himself by going to these community meetings where most of them got sick at the same time!

Anésie: He had to do his job.

Kamikazi: Is that so? April 27, he went to the big political rallies; was that his job?

Anésie: Your father was a government engineer, Irene, he had to be with his employer.

Kamikazi: You and he couldn't keep away from dowry parties, weddings, veil-raising, even simple engagements! You went to a party where some of the guests had been ill the week before. Was that his job?

Anésie: Do you remember? “Some are locked in their homes, but God has accepted that we should come together. God loves Burundi, and if some have contracted the coronavirus, it is to allow the di-

vine action to transpire.” He had to be with his employer. And this, with his social. Kamikazi: The same one who declared in June that corona was the greatest enemy of Burundians? Just two months later?

Anésie: Yes, so what? Do you want to contradict him? To embezzle him? Putting him in a vindictive position?

Kamikazi: Did you ever think that one of you might die?

Anésie: You just want to get angry. Stubbornly. And no one is going to help you, my child. Not in this state. Not in this country.

Kamikazi: I know that. That’s why I don’t need any help, I have everything I need in this room and I’m going to get it.

Anésie: Don’t forget that this is my home, young lady. I could take you out of this room, cut off all internet connections, and confiscate your little instrument of obsession, including that damn stereo system you keep bugging me with!

Kamikazi turns her back to her mother.

Anésie: Do you think your father wanted to die? Do you think your father was so backward as to buy into the stories of the divine layer that would protect us from the damn virus? On the other hand, is this the first health crisis, or the last one that will wipe out humans? Tell me, young lady? And if not, why should it prevent us from being together?

Kamikazi: Because it kills, Mom. Because we would reduce it like that, because of science, Mom. Because it wouldn’t have taken Da’s life. And prayers will not bring him back.

Pause. Anésie goes out and finds the five pressed against the door.

Anésie: *(to the five embarrassed)* Dear friends, I thank you for your heart. And for your listening. I'm afraid I'm going to have to say goodbye because my daughter needs to talk to her mother.

The five: May the Virgin Mary be with you.

Anésie: Amen.

The five leave as Kamikazi turns on her stereo system. Anésie goes to close the door to the terrace. From the stereo system, male and female voices follow one another in a particular rhythm. Her mother will simultaneously speak to her, walking peacefully towards her room.

Stereo system: Zero cases.

436,000 people – 8 million confirmed cases

3.81 million recoveries – The Ministry of Health could share information.

Death at 55 – signs of hand washing.

The control body, INSP – God has cleared the coronavirus from the skies of Burundi.

40 to 50% of the population –

down to 0.2, based on – Maintain at least one metre distance.

only 23 people were hospitalised – Wash hands with soap.

100 times fewer deaths than in Europe – Do not greet each other with your hands.

In Wuhan, China, last December, the new coronavirus – Religion is the opium of the people. – In at least 188 countries and regions – Precautions.

The discovery of the first three confirmed cases of COVID-19 –

Factual information essential to protect their health – Antiseptic products.

Zero cases.

“An enemy must be hunted wherever he hides And even when its presence is suspected.”

Anésie: You know Irene, you are much stronger than you want to show. And much more intelligent. We are both affected by the death of your father. We have two completely different ways of healing. And this is normal. I am fifty—one; you are seventeen. He was my partner; if it's up to me he's *still* my life partner; for you, he was not only a loving father but also your friend, your mentor, and your role model. We might have had some disagreements with him, but you learned from him. He comforted you, listened to you, and respected you. He included you in his work questions that you put at the centre of the universe and that resulted in the person you are. Ambitious, strong, thoughtful, empathetic, and sensitive. Observer. Curious. Dreamy. Now you have to use what it has given you instead of destroying what it can no longer give you. Love as close. You want to keep out all those who come near you. Why? Do you think this is how you will be loyal to the complicity you had with your father?

Kamikazi: Nothing to do with it.

Anésie: So, you think that's how you defend it? That you do justice to it by distancing yourself from those around you?

Silence.

Anésie: Your father was not like that. You know it. I don't know what he would say exactly, but if you told him about Mars, he would tell you about the planet we are on.

Kamikazi bursts into tears.

Anésie: Look at this world that didn't expect to be forced to stay at home and you wish to voluntarily shut yourself off within the walls of your room? You decide that this world has nothing more to offer you and that everything can only come from you. The tools that Kagabo left you were to open up to others. Not to the objects. Closing the door to others is a self-mutilation that you are happy to do to yourself as if you need to suffer again and again. Suffering is not strength, my dear. This is not the way to be loyal to your father. *(Pause)* I am talking about you and your interplanetary migration.

Kamikazi: We are not going to survive here, Mom. You know it. And...

Kamikazi bursts into tears.

15 Child – of a tender nature.

Anésie: Tell me, mwana¹⁵.

Kamikazi: I will lose you soon. I'll stay here alone, with... no one.

Anésie: Now, Kamikazi. I would like you to try to understand what I am about to say. What is important today, what counts when someone you love says goodbye, what is crucial, is to keep the person inside you with all the memories, all the moments spent with the person, all the acts of love, the joy shared, that is what counts. What counts are the words that have touched us, that have moved something in us, and that invigorate us to move forward. This is what is vital. Don't erase your father with that toxic stereo system. You never play his voice. It is still more pleasant to listen to?

Kamikazi: It hurts. It is so... alive.

Anésie: Yes.

Anésie: Your father lived for both of us. He lived firmly and honestly. And everywhere. He lives today. In me. I see him on his sofa, in his cup of tea, in his shoes. I hear it when I want to decide on something and when I express an opinion at work. And the others remind me. Constantly. As if he were stubbornly manifesting himself. I can't forget him. Sometimes in the mornings, I look forward to sitting in his chair and savouring in the silence the memories of his words when he told me about his theory on the non-existence of God.

Kamikazi: Hahah...

Anésie: He did it to get me fly off the handle when he thought I was too quiet for his taste. He is there despite his death.

Kamikazi: What do I tell Ncuti and Keza? And everyone will ask me about my problem.

In this passage, the choice may be for Anésie to courteously take her daughter's hand and lead her out of her room and into the living room, or for her to invite her in with a sign, or for her words to move her daughter themselves

Anésie: We are recovering from an extremely hard event. We will never know the extent of the scars he left in us, that you were confined, and that you meet them to deconfine yourself. To speak, to love, to confront, to suffer, but above all to adjust your movement from interplanetary migration to return to yourself.

Kamikazi: I'm still going to do this university, Mom.

Anésie: I know that.

Anésie presses her phone.

Kagabo: If this damn virus takes me, I'm sure Kamikazi will burn the whole Earth. Please don't let her, we both know she is capable of it. Remind her that I love her, in your own words, in Kirundi, that this speaks to her heart and not to her head. And you, woman, Cirore Canje¹⁶, I know it wasn't easy to be with a free spirit like me, but I did my best to make you happy. That was my best. I love you as much as the Vatican Bible. *(Pause)* Can you hear me, my Virgin?

He cries. Kamikazi and Anésie laugh and cry.

Kagabo: I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I'll be there every time you close your eyes for your mysterious prayers. That's it; that's enough! *(Clearing his throat)* If I don't die, this will have been

a moment of panic and it will have to be deleted. Otherwise, the little one will make a whole chapter of it. Ndagukunda¹⁷.

Kamikazi looks at her mother who is holding her phone tenderly, kisses her, and goes back to her room. Blackness.

Months later...

On a screen. A video plays. Kamikazi speaks, only to give way to various faces, some blurred.
Kamikazi: Hello everybody, so today I am in downtown Bujumbura, precisely at SODECO, the bus station, where I interviewed 10 of my fellow citizens, whom I don't know at all; to ask them what covid has changed in their lives, three years later. As you must know from my first videos, I am one of the few orphans of COVID-19 because fortunately in Africa there have been few deaths. So, I wondered what impact covid has had on people who have not lost their loved ones, follow their answers in this video. Thanks, and kisses to those who will subscribe to my YouTube Channel!

Citizen 1 and Citizen 2 on the terrace of an exchange office.

Citizen 1: I didn't do any containment, but my friends who work in NGOs, especially those who offered me drinks, were all forced to self-contain. That was the first change for me.

Citizen 2 laughing on the side: Yeah, man. It was a very unfortunate change!

Citizen 1: The funny thing was that every time there was a third or fourth wave in South Africa, the confined friends would tell us by phone that they had had COVID-19. But we who were outside nothing! What was the phenomenon?

Citizen 2 laughing again: Have we been tested?

*They look at each other and laugh together.
Citizen 1 remembers.*

Citizen 1: Actually, yes! Once at ETS!

Citizen 2: It was out of obligation, hahaha! And you had a message that said you had been in contact with a contaminated person.

Citizen 3 and Citizen 4 are in their car in the car park.

18 Small fishy tasting insects – come in the rainy season in Burundi.

19 “Women”

Citizen 3: We Africans are immune for life; this coronavirus did not affect Burundi. Imagine, when I was a little girl, I played in the kitchen while grilling ubunyabobo¹⁸. What do you call it in English?

Citizen 4: (confused) N’ubunyabobo, why do you want English...?

Citizen 3: Her video is in English; she is a city child. She asked the question in English, peasant!

Kamikazi laughs in the background.

Citizen 3: The ... In short. I’ve played in rivers, all of which strengthen our ability to fight viruses.

Citizen 4: Wa mugo¹⁹, the Chinese also eat insects, they died of Covid.

Citizen 3: Do you know about African and Asian insects?

Citizen 4: Yes, I studied in Hong Kong, and we played together as children.

Citizen 3 has a moment of strange silence and looks at the camera.

20 Well, I didn't get a covid.
That's my point.

Citizen 3: Well, sinagwaye Covid. Nivyo nshatse kuvuga.²⁰

Citizen 5 is behind a cash register in a beauty shop.

Citizen 5: As a beauty saleswoman, I am very, very happy that this virus has left the habit of washing hands before entering my shop. In truth, I tell you... (*she pauses*) Ehh?

Microphone image: I was asking if you were trying to imitate Jesus...

Citizen 5: Huh?

Microphone image: The phrase “truly I say to you... Jesus...”
The link.

Citizen 5: Eeeh... Yes, I am a Christian. So, I was saying... I'm very, very happy. I used to be afraid of men who touched everything... (*whispering*) Do you know that they pee in the streets, like this? What if they touch my beauty lotions without buying them and I touch them afterwards? Do you think about it from time to time, about those people who pee and touch? Long live Covid!

Citizen 6, passenger, under a tree.

Citizen 6: Very bad impact, especially in terms of culture, we no longer greet each other by hand in the church. It's a pity because of the peaceful greeting, “indamukanyo y'amahoro”... Do you

21 The parents—in-law used to line up and wave at each other, now they wave at each other from a distance.

22 Will I see myself on National Radio and Television?

23 Tell me...

24 Bye! Or "Strength!"

understand? Very, very important. Why, because it was a moment when you wish peace to someone you don't know, who is together with you; in the church like that. And you could not find this in the church! Then. Take, for example, the dowries. Dowries, before... Bamwana bararamukanya, ubu barapeperana²¹. Which means what? This means that these Covid customs... It stayed. Then how

can we live in a society that does not greet each other? These measures were bizarre. It traumatised me.

Camera: Thank you.

Citizen 6: You're welcome, thank you. Ndaza kwibona kuri RTNB ?²² Hewe²³.

Citizen 7 wearing a mask, hat, and sunglasses, sitting in front of a pharmacy.

Citizen 7: See this mask? It has saved me from several situations that I do not wish to mention here. You said you're not going to show my face? Yes. I had a lot of debt, I didn't go out anymore, and now I can go and enjoy the lake publicly without being caught. Haha, komera²⁴!

Citizens 8 and 9 smoke on a cheque restaurant terrace.

Citizen 8: Thanks to the confinement of passengers, my bankrupt hotel has seen its turnover return to normal. Now if you ask travellers (*camera on Citizen 9 who was counting money and posing with a sad face*), especially foreigners, for whom a test that would cost 60.000 Fbu for Burundians costs 100 Dollars...

Citizen 9: 100 Euros!

Citizen 8: Same thing, here. (*Camera on Citizen 9 moving his head from left to right*) Well, I don't think they will have the same happy story with Covid, like me. Now I wonder what I would be without Covid—19.

Citizen 9: Yes, it was horrible.

Citizen 10 and Citizen 11 on a public bench in Independence Square.

Citizen 10: This paper on permission to leave the country left me feeling claustrophobic in my own country. Globalisation seemed to be a myth insofar as borders were quickly erected, and it was at the same time a reality if we analyse the speed with which the pandemic colonised the globe.

Citizen 11: You never know in real life. Freedom is never a given. From this, then, we seize every bit of freedom we encounter and smile at the unknown and the unfamiliar. Even when the movement is restricted.

Camera: Are you vaccinated?

Citizen 10: Of course.

Citizen 11: (to Citizen 11) Really?

KIBSA ANTHONY OUEDRAOGO

Kibsa Anthony Ouedraogo is a Burkina Faso-based writer, screenwriter, actor, and mime artist from Ouagadougou, who writes in Mori and French, and is active in African and European theatre events and projects (including the well-known pan-African festival *Récréatrales*). His political works deal with contemporary life and society.

KIBSA ANTHONY OUEDRAOGO

SPATIAL DECONFINEMENT

PROLOGUE

Today.

Today, the whole planet is under attack.

So, we should move as little as we can.

At the risk of saying what we already know.

It is worth repeating: Wash your hands frequently with soap.

It doesn't cost a thing to wash your hands.

Tell me, how much is it not shaking my hand?

Evil is quite real.

And it needs to be taken seriously.

Without panic or zeal

We need to act rigorously.

From now on the watchword is to stay at home

Call the emergency if you feel any symptoms.

No need to clutter the line.

There are lives at stake, you are a Burkinabe, so don't be undignified.

This time we're all together and God is urging us

It is good to have faith.

But now it's in the crease of your elbow that you cough.

A quick aside: this might be a good time to quit smoking

Or don't buy retail anymore, no longer sharing fags between ten people in the building.

You can always take the beer to go

To be home by 7 pm otherwise... should I carry on?

Together we can take the crown off this coronavirus.
Every day the numbers increase.
Evil is real so let's beware of the fake news spiral.

If it is not official, they are making it up.
All those videos that they are spicing up.
It has nothing to do with the sun.
Whether you are Togolese, Gabonese, Japanese, German,
or Russian
You are not software either.
So, don't think you're an anti-virus.
It's all of us together and with some discipline, we can
take the crown off this coronavirus.

My love, can you put the phone on your belly?
I can hear her heartbeat, yes! It's beating fast! I am far away, I am cold.
Mum says you've started kicking her, is that true? That's good. It means that
you're fine where you are. Maybe your kicks are also a way of asking her
where daddy is. I'll be joining you soon, I just have a bit more work to do.
As soon as I finish, I'll jump on the first plane to join you. It's true, I'm not
joking. By the way, this morning I went to Düsseldorf, which is in the west
of Germany. I went there so that they could take my fingerprints. Yes, I must
do all this to get to you, but it's nothing, nothing is hard enough for a father
who wants to witness the birth of his child, his firstborn. Don't worry, it is not
difficult. The first thing that I must do is to log on to the Canadian immigra-
tion website and create an account with a password, put in the name that
your mother and I plan to give you, random numbers, upper and lower case
letters, and an exclamation mark. I enter my surname, first name, age, gen-
der, date of birth, place of birth, city of birth, country of birth, citizenship,
address, address from which I am applying, marital status, single, married,
spouse present, spouse absent, in a common-law relationship, divorced,
widowed, telephone number, mailing address, street, building, spoken lan-
guages, language preference, passport number, do I hold an Israeli pass-
port, national identity card number, dates of issue and expiry, countries of
issue. No, it is not difficult. I just need to add the purpose of the visit, if I am
related to a Canadian citizen or a permanent resident, friends, their names,
phone, and address, I need to add a letter of invitation, proof of financial

means from my bank, all the places and people I plan to visit, the history of all my travels in the last ten years, my school and university background, where I have worked in the last ten years, fill in a form to give information about your grandfather and grandmother, your uncles and aunts, their names, age, sex, date of birth, place of birth, city of birth, country of birth, citizenship, address, marital status, single, married, in a common-law relationship, divorced, widowed, working, retired or dead. It can't stop me from coming to you and being the first one to hug you. I forgot, the last form is to fill in information on my legal situation, for example: have I ever committed a crime, and do I intend to commit one once in Canada? On top of this, have I ever been arrested by the police, have I ever participated in political demonstrations, am I a member of a political party? If I answered yes to any of these questions, there would be other forms to be filled in. I add two recent photos of myself, upload, pay one hundred dollars and then go to the nearest Canadian immigration centre to provide the data, fingerprints, and signatures. As I was in Bonn, all of it wasn't difficult, the nearest immigration centre was in Düsseldorf. That is why I was in Düsseldorf this morning. No more kicking, you must be asleep.

Frankfurt Airport. Panic. Masks over the noses. A young man stands in line. It's his turn to have his luggage screened. The alarm sounds in the hall.

Whose bag, is it?

It is mine.

Come this way, sir.

In English, please.

Your bag contains a computer.

I am deeply sorry. I have completely forgotten.

Come with me.

The police officer searches the young man and his luggage. A few minutes later...

Sir, you are not allowed to keep your computer for the screening. We will have to reboot the whole system.

I'm very sorry, I thought I had taken it out of my bag.
My apologies.
Your passport, please.

Here you go.
Burkina Faso
Yes, this is my country, I'm going home.

I did not find anything wrong, but I will ask you to be vigilant next time. I'll take a last look if you'll allow me.

Yes, of course, go ahead. This has never happened to me before, you know. I am a bit lost amid this madness. What's happening is crazy, I was supposed to be on stage at this time. The tour had started well, we had a lot of people every night, and then bam! Hospitals are filling up, people are dying, schools are closed, then the theatres... I'm a comedian. I make my living on stage, the theatres are closed sir, I have to go home. I was due back in a month. But suddenly everything closed. On TV they talk about a lockdown, everyone having to stay home, and for how long, no one knows. Sir, I had thirty minutes to decide where I prefer to be confined, at home but away from my family who are in Canada, my wife is pregnant, or to stay here, in the cold which is not so unbearable for me but away from my family without knowing when all this madness will end! I called my wife, she asked if I couldn't come directly to Canada, but I applied for a visa only a week ago, to join them, but now I have to leave, do you understand why I left my computer in the backpack when I went through the detector? I'm a mess sir, I'm sorry.

I did not find anything wrong, but I will ask you to be vigilant next time.

Addis Ababa airport, at night.

I am waiting. I'm halfway down a road that leads nowhere. I am waiting. There's a café, a tea shop next door, I don't know. On

the screens, the flights are cancelled one by one. Two, then three, then four. I am going to Ouagadougou, via Lomé. Do I need to run? To where? No one answers, and no one asks questions, but I do. What are borders? The dictionary says: the limit of a state's territory and the exercise of territorial jurisdiction. Who decided, one day, that from here on, this is my home? who gave them this right? behind this river, this mountain, from this valley, it is not my home anymore. You can only enter under certain conditions. It's absurd, especially for me, an African, that some men met in Germany, where I was a few hours ago, and they agreed, from here to here, it's Burkina Faso, and the limit of these hills is Burundi. And to this day, I am halfway down a road that leads nowhere, confined to myself, on land that takes me away from myself. I am waiting. It's almost time to board, I'm going home, but not to leave again. It's crazy! A virus, invisible, that doesn't care about borders, doesn't need a visa. It doesn't make appointments at the embassy; it just gave them the finger! All your barriers, appointments, and procedures, you can stick wherever you wish! From now on, I'm the one in charge.

Sir, adjust your mask properly, over your nose.

Okay. Here you go. I'll take my computer out of my backpack...

Lomé airport, at night.

A stopover before dawn, the day will rise with us at home, questioning "What's waiting for me there?" I feel waves of doubt, fear, joy, and anger. What is this virus? I think, maybe I wish for one thing and its opposite. Wishing that all these borders would fall, so I could go wherever I wanted, wherever duty called me, wherever the world was waiting for me. Leave my home, leave me to go and meet the world, go back to my home, invite the world, and the whole world can stay. Yet. Yet isn't that how the virus spreads? Isn't it because of the multiplication of cultural relationships that infect every part of the globe, as if all continents were sleeping together without protecting themselves? Yet what does nature intend to teach us? What does it have to tell us at this precise moment when bats are diurnal, felines vegetarian, and humans hibernate like marmots? My flight is not cancelled, so I go home, pale yet smiling. Yet what do they mean by con-

finement? No more going out, no more travelling, no more drinks, no more, no more? No more, until all the blind governments see a bit more clearly. What is waiting for me at home? what is it like seeing my mother again without her being able to hold me in her arms? I will have to live with her. She's not so young anymore, and from what I've heard, this disease is taking its toll on the elderly. What is it to live in Ouaga without being able to go to Gambidi, sit in a cafeteria, and rebuild the world with apprentice children? What is it like to live in Zone 1 without being able to enjoy pieces of pork bites roasted by D.G., drinking litres of beer while cursing at the government? What is living when you have to stay at home? Oh, I can hear them, already, "as an artist, we expect you to raise awareness through your art!"

Passengers travelling to Ouagadougou are invited to gate 2 for boarding.

Ouagadougou.

The President in his speech.

..I have therefore decided to introduce a curfew from 7 p.m. to 5 a.m., until further notice...

**A young man enters a family courtyard.
The family is sitting down.**

A woman

Oh, Mom, you know that he's coming from Europe. You brought us the virus.

The young man

Usually, you ask me if I've brought you a phone, shoes, or a handbag.

The woman

Yes, but this time it's not the same thing, the disease is killing many people in Europe. Don't get too close.

Another lady.

Leave him alone. Are you all right, son?

The young man

Yes, everything is fine. I came back two weeks ago. Is he there? I need to see him urgently.

The woman

He went out, but they said everyone had to stay at home.
He's out and so are you.

The lady

He is the one who has just arrived.

The woman

It's better if you meet each other outside. Go away from here,
you better contaminate yourselves there!

The young man

You will never change. I'll meet my friend outside. Be well!

With his friend.

The friend

Hi bro, how are you?

The young man

I'm choking, brother!

The friend

I understand. Let's go to the bar for a drink.

The young man

What bar is open in this town?

The friend

Well, this isn't Germany, there's always a way to... you
know. The small bar near the bridge is always open, well,
open is a bit of an overstatement, it remains closed but
when you are inside you are served. **(Laughter).**

The young man

At this point, I wouldn't say no.

The friend

Even after curfew, it remains closed but open inside.

They sit down.

The young man

I'm going crazy... This situation is not getting any better.

The friend

What do you expect, the world is going crazy.

The young man

I feel like I'm personally targeted by this virus, this confinement and all. I'm racing against time; I'm racing against this world, all I wish is to join my wife who is pregnant, and is due in a month, maybe a bit sooner. Every day, I check my mailbox as if I were waiting for the last train. Nothing. They say nothing.

The friend

You didn't go there?

The young man

A poster: We inform the public that our offices remain closed until further notice. Please call or email us in case of emergency only. I call every day to talk to the same machine that tells me the same thing that is written on the poster on the door of the immigration office.

The friend

Trust life, you can't change anything.

The young man

It is precisely to life that I go. I go to live, take it in my arms, and cut its umbilical cord. I go to life to provide it with the warmth of a father. I will provide it with the clumsiness of a brand-new father to a newborn. I go to live so that it comes to me so that it does not come without me.

The friend

I read this morning that the Malagasy have found a remedy for this damned virus. Who knows, we will soon be deconfined.

The young man

Madagascar? Do you think that WHO and the rest will certify this remedy? Nothing good comes from Africa my brother, that's how it is.

The friend

The president of the Republic of Madagascar drank the potion in front of the media, everyone is using it and it works. Last night my aunt brought us some bitter herbs,

a remedy from the nuns in my village, I drink some and tell myself that nothing can harm my lungs, not even this disease discovered far away in China.

The young man

Created or discovered?

The friend

Look, I'm not into these conspiracy theories.

The young man

At the moment I'm into everything! I don't know what to do...

The friend

There is nothing to be done. Apart from waiting for the storm to pass. Another beer?

The young man

Perhaps there is nothing else to be done.

Video. WhatsApp. Police officers beat passers-by on their motorbikes with their cords because they do not respect the curfew of confinement

II

Put the phone on your stomach, I want to hear her.

Do you recognise my voice? It's amazing. I'm scared, you know. I'm afraid I won't see you for ages. I'm afraid your mother is too angry with me. Yes, I can hear your heart beating. It is beating fast. It's fighting with me already. I'm at the border, in the line of fire where everyone wears a mask. You too are at the border, that of your mother's womb. She is probably angry with me for not being there when her sciatica grips her, for not being there to satisfy her almost hormonally-induced fantasies. We're both at the border, you'll be out soon but I'm not sure I'll be able to get in. I logged into my account again today. They say that there are opportunities for flights to Canada. Only for Canadian citizens and permanent residents. If I had the visa, I could have taken a flight costing 3000 dollars. It's a small price to pay for paradise. The paradise of your first cry, the paradise of the remains of your placenta that I will keep to bury them at home, in your country. It's

a small price to pay to play the best role in my life. But you see, I'm afraid. Yes, you do well to kick, it encourages me a lot. As I said, I finally sent an email this morning, they said it was possible. I could write to them directly to find out what stage my application was at and whether I wanted to change it. I changed it; I told them, I must join you for your birth, it is the first event of your life, and I must not miss it. I told them I would not come for tourism, I don't want to visit the country, I don't want to walk around, I just want to witness your birth. I told them I'll do all the tests they want me to do, I'll take all the necessary precautions, I just want to come and be with you at home. I want to come and experience the sleeplessness, the peeing, the pooping, the drooling, the bottle-feeding, and the teething. Against all odds, I want to experience that moment when that little tag is attached to your toe. Some oceans separate us, thousands of places that separate us, but it's a tiny beast that keeps me from you, that keeps me from this moment. I do not despair. A father does not lose. A father does not cry. I will listen to your heartbeat every night, each beat will give me more motivation to pick you up from your mother's breast. Sleep, sleep tight, for the moment we are all confined: you in your mother's womb, I in the womb of our planet. Everything is done to keep me there, but you will soon come out, you will soon cry and laugh at life. I'm not going to lie to you, I'm a bit scared of it all. I am afraid.

Ouagadougou, 1993.

Dango

Burkina Faso is not immune. It's going to happen spontaneously, so fast that the human being will not have time to react because we are not only at the end of a millennium, but also at the end of a century, and cycle 7 is recurring. I have personally studied the morphology of the AIDS virus and I am concerned, because the cosmic plan with the help of the chart, brings out another virus. The AIDS virus is therefore the second to last before the year 2000.

Traoré

So, there is another virus?!

Dango

There is another virus.

Traoré

I can invite you to my show on the national channel. How should I introduce you?

Dango

I am a scientist. I need to alert the world to what will happen in about 27 years.

Traoré

Everyone would think you were a lunatic; you know that. Your fellow researchers will say that you want to scare the population.

Dango

Let me explain this on your programme and we'll see. I dare to believe that I will finally have a laboratory to continue my research.

Ouagadougou. In the bar. The young man is talking with friends. Gossip, thoughts, and official information intermingle.

Friend 1

The curfew has been lifted as of today.

Friend 2

It's not a moment too soon, we are finally deconfined.

The young man

Say it for yourself. I am still confined here.

Friend 1

What do you mean? The government says we still have to restrict movement, but the curfew is lifted.

The young man

Are the borders open?

Friend 1

Not yet.

The young man

That's what I say: confined! Confined to a space of 274,400

square kilometres. A prison just a little larger than the territory of the United Kingdom.

Friend 3

You have other problems.

The young man

Some researchers have called it subjective sensitivity, but I'm not sure.

Friend 2

In any case, there are several kinds of confinement. Haven't you noticed that terrorist attacks have decreased lately?

Friend 3

Terrorists are also afraid of the virus. In the latest attack in the north of the country, they looted a pharmaceutical warehouse. If only this damn virus could decimate them all, these sons of bitches, there would at least be a positive side to all this.

The young man

As there is no more movement, they cannot intercept food from traders, or loot markets, as these are closed. There may be a bright side to all this. A break, a respite for our soldiers before the general, and total deconfinement.

Friend 1

A break for them too.

Friend 3

There are reports of nests of terrorists being decimated by the virus, and as they cannot be treated in hospital they are trapped. It's crazy but maybe this virus will fight them for us.

The young man

Don't dream either; not all terrorists live hidden in the desert or the bush. Many of them live with and among people, so they can contaminate. I wonder why these people can rebel against their country to the point of killing their brothers. Does it take a virus to remind us that we are all human?

Friend 2

I say that all this is because of the Europeans who supply them with weapons, that's all.

Friend 1

Terrorists are not Europeans, brother!

Friend 2

They are not European, but they don't make weapons either. It is weapons that are the main ingredient of terrorism. And what proof is there that this virus is not just another weapon they have invented to accomplish their evil purposes?

Friend 3

But the virus appeared in China! I don't think they'll invent a weapon that can destroy everyone including themselves.

The young man

This is the case for all weapons.

Friend 2

Look, what do they always tell us? Terrorism is born out of bad governance, corruption, ethnic or religious problems, liberation movements of independence claims, etc. but these are secondary reasons, simply because these same problems exist all over the world even in Europe and the only difference is that at home nobody comes to arm these groups. There are problems with the Corsicans, in the Basque country, the autonomous community of Catalonia, between the Flemish and the Walloons, I could quote you all night long, that no one arms these movements or stirs up the fire of these conflicts; but here, in Africa, they are armed to the teeth overnight and the blood starts to spill. Who bombed Libya? Planes came that never even took the time to land in Sirte or Tripoli, Gaddafi the big bad dictator was lynched in the public square, by those just like the people who hanged Saddam. The result: warehouses full of money of all currencies and

bunkers with incredible open-air arsenals, all went to help themselves as if to a satanic buffet from where, the Islamic State, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Iyag Ag Gali, Moktar Bel Moktar, Amadou Kouffa, all these hyenas found there their working capital to embark on their criminal adventure! I say it's all been well planned!

The young man

The relationship between Africa and Europe must change, if only for the sake of future generations.

Friend 3

If I have one piece of advice for future generations, it is not to come... this world is lost.

Friend 1

The world has been lost many times, but human being always finds a solution, I have faith in Mankind.

The young man

I cannot afford to be pessimistic. The future generation for me will soon be here.

Friend 2

As a frequent visitor to Europe, do you believe that there is a chance that these relationships of domination will change?

The young man

I won't be able to tell you anything other than what everyone already knows, it's a small world and that's not a metaphor. For the time being, the spaces must be deconfined.

Friend 3

This is not the first nor the only confinement that is inflicted on us here. We black people can't get around as we want in this world. As you said, we are the face that the world wants to hide. We are beset by political unrest, diseases of all kinds, confined to 30 million square kilometres, and a granary of natural resources, which everyone comes to draw from. When we leave our countries, and we are immigrants, Europeans are expatriates, we flee the war to seek asylum, but we are illegal immigrants. When doing paperwork on the required con-

ditions; they tell us that we live in safe countries so we do not meet the criteria necessary for obtaining asylum. You've got to be kidding me!

Friend 2

Now we don't have to travel for a disease that doesn't even kill us.

Friend 1

Believe me, there are still deaths here.

Friend 2

300 people at most, all died of other things, diabetes, malaria, do you know how many people die every year from malaria here? This virus is just a new form of the cold, full stop.

The young man

There are hundreds of thousands of deaths there. And every day it gets worse. I am somehow convinced that I will not get the visa. Even if I have it, where will I go? It's funny, planes fly empty, with no one in them, so that airlines can keep their air corridors. Meanwhile, I would just like to be a fly, a little insect to get into one of those planes. It's unbelievable how much space there is! I applied online, for biometric enrolment in Germany, the file has to be sent to the Senegal office and I have to receive an urgent answer from the Mexico office, to tell me if I can go to Canada and everything is suddenly blocked because of a virus in China.

Ouagadougou, the same night.

Dango

I admit that I did talk about a virus on this science show, but I couldn't name the virus, because it was through my work that I was able to determine a periodic cycle that came as a result of the physical expansion of the universe, and this physical expansion of the universe has an impact on living beings. Honestly, I couldn't name the virus because at a different time and under different circumstances I could have been guillotined as nobody would believe me. In any case, in 1993 they didn't believe

me, I could have been accused of being crazy. It's cyclical, there will always be cycles. There always will be. After this one, the next figure is 38, if you consider that it's 38 years since 1993, we're at 27 years, aren't we? We will see in 11 years what will follow...

The message of the Great Pyramid of Egypt is simple: it tells us about the past, it tells us about the present and unfortunately, it tells us about the future. I say unfortunately because it is not a pretty future that this monument indicates. It's not a pretty sight if even simple little micro-organisms are causing panic on the whole planet Earth. Governments put billions into making nuclear weapons, and this little organism called coronavirus manages to destroy them in front of their billion-dollar weapons. This means that human beings are not far-sighted, what is going to kill us now is not these weapons, it's the tiny beings that we didn't think of that will take us all away one day. The plan of the Great Pyramid is a plan which in itself holds power. Why? Because it is an exact reflection of the anatomical configuration of the human brain, which is inversely proportional to the physical configuration of space...

Ouagadougou, in the bar.

Friend 2

Do you remember everything they predicted? that here in Africa, millions of bodies of people infected with the virus will be littering the roadsides. You bet!

Friend 3

All our European friends want to stay here, they are going to stay here because the confinement here is not as severe as at home.

The young man

They have the right passport, as we often say, they come and go as they please.

Friend 1

I saw a report about Asians in Europe, they are discriminated against and rejected by people who think that they are the cause of the evil that is decimating them.

The young man

It's the same everywhere, there's always someone to blame for everything; even in Asia, there's racism wrapped up in the pandemic, racism towards black people, because people think we're more resistant to the disease when we're transmitting it...

Friend 2

They are not wrong; I mean they are right to think that but not to have racist attitudes. Where are the millions of deaths that the experts and the Western media had predicted in Africa? Some say that it is because we do not have enough means to carry out sufficient tests that we do not know, otherwise, in reality, there would be thousands of deaths per day, the joke of the century, and how we hide a thousand deaths per day?

Friend 3

You see our leaders are doing everything to make the situation look worse, it attracts support funds to this, and humanitarian donations to that, and the vast majority will land in their bank accounts, well stashed in Switzerland.

The young man

And the president who makes a speech to tell us that there will be subsidies granted by the state, he talks and talks but, in the end, nothing concerning the artists (**laughs**).

Friend 1

This is a general situation.

The young man

It's true, in France, Belgium, etc. the arts professions are rising against the policies put in place without considering the field of culture, they say that it is not essential!

III

The young man is standing in front of the door of the immigration service. He presses the doorbell.

The young man

Hello. Hello, I would like to inquire. Hello?

The intercom

Hello. Madam. Sir. Our. Services. Are. Closed. To. Avoid. The. Spread. Of. The virus. Please. For. The. Emergencies. Only. Contact. The. Number. 25.25.35.60. Do. Not. Forget. The. Safety. Instructions. Posted. At. the entrance. We. Thank. You. For. Contacting. Us.

The young man

I want to talk to a human. This is unbelievable!

He dials the number. Hello!

The voice

Please wait a moment, an agent will take your call shortly.

A pause. If you wish to contact the legalization service of administrative documents, press 1. For visa service press 2.

For “other information” press 3. **He presses.** This service is not available at the moment, please try again later.

Discouraged, he sits down at the base of the building. A woman approaches. She is a security guard.

The security guard

Their offices have been closed for several months. You should call them or send an e-mail.

The young man

I know ma'am, I only came, hoping that they have reopened. As some offices are starting to open again here.

The security guard

Ah, at least they have not yet opened. Is it for studies?
Aren't the universities closed there?

The young man

No, it's not for studies.

The security guard

If it's for work, it's better to do the job remotely, isn't it?

The young man

Not for work, no, not anymore. I have to join my wife who
is about to give birth.

The security guard

Ooh! You know, there is a lady who comes by from time
to time to pick up documents and take care of business.
If you want, wait a bit, maybe you'll come across her if
you're lucky. Good luck my son.

She is leaving. After a while.

The young man

The mask is on my chin. A few drops of sweat mingle with the
tears. I have a few pieces of paper in my hand and no one at
the end of the line. I talk to the machines; I understand their
language well now. They keep repeating the same thing in
their metal voice. I wait in vain for a response from a mouth,
from a living organism. All I ask for is an answer. I sit down,
it says please wear your mask. But why wear a mask if I have
no access to anyone? It's like the plague, smallpox, or AIDS,
no one has anything to do with this. We're just waiting for it to
pass; the survivors will continue the prank.

Air France agency.

The young man

I would like to change these plane tickets, please.

The lady

Okay. For what date?

The young man

Until what date are your tickets changeable?

The lady

What do you mean until when? When do you wish to change them?

The young man

I want to change them to a date when I am sure the trip will take place.

The lady

I don't know. You see the situation; how do you expect me to know that?

The young man

So, you can see why I'm not sure which date to change these tickets for.

The lady

And what do I do in the end?

The young man

Change them for next year.

The lady

Oh no, that's not possible. Where do you think you can change a ticket for next year?

The young man

In a company, where agents understand the situation of their clients and propose alternatives.

The lady

Sir let's calm down. You don't have to be unpleasant.

The young man

You have been very unpleasant since I came in here. Have I been disrespectful?

The lady

Look, what I can suggest is that you ask for a refund, as you are not sure you can travel.

The young man

Do that.

One moment.

The lady

It's done. You will receive the refund within a maximum of one month.

The young man

Thank you. Here is the second ticket.

The lady

And what do you want me to do with this?

The young man

You can do whatever you want with it. Madam, cancel it, throw it in the fire, and do as you please. Do you think it was a ticket I got for charity? So do what you want with it! It was a plane ticket for my mother. That's how it is at our house, it's my mother who gives the baby his first bath. This acrobatic bath gives you shivers, which probably is the reason for the expression sleeping like a baby. She is the one who attends the last few weeks of the pregnancy, she gives essential advice, and she is the manual from which we will take the knowledge we need to have with our first child and even others. This is how things are done in our country. It is the paternal grandmother, who heats some Shea butter in a shard of a clay pot, for the massage of the swelling navel and the still fragile joints of the child who is going to be born. It's just a plane ticket for you, but for me, it's a whole cultural construct that is falling apart. Who will show my wife and me the ancient techniques of the healing and invigorating bath of the newborn? And you, you want to know what you will do with this plane ticket today? I don't know. I am in no way responsible for your bad mood, let alone the education you received. But go ahead. Do as you please, madam.

The lady

I will start the refund procedure.

The young man

As you wish.

At home.

The young man

I finally have your plane ticket.

The mother

You started smoking again.

The young man

I'm not talking about that. I would like to inform you that unfortunately, we will not be able to travel anymore.

The mother

You should think about quitting smoking. Your health is failing, your life is in danger. I don't even know why you are self-destructing. For the journey, it's no big deal, God knows what He's doing.

The young man

I don't know what to do anymore. I haven't heard from the embassy or the immigration service either. They are not yet open.

I won't be able to file your application and I don't even know where they are with processing mine.

The mother

Have you heard from your wife?

The young man

Not yet, I'll call her later.

The mother

Do that, that's the most important, for the rest, God only knows.

The young man

I don't know what to say to her either. She needs me so much...

The mother

I understand. You are lucky, now you can talk and see each other on the phone.

The young man

WhatsApp is good, but being there is much better.

The mother

Did you send her any money?

The young man

I gave her all my savings when we were in Cotonou. The theatres will soon reopen here, I'll be able to work a bit, I'll send her something. But what she wants cannot be sent. It's me she's waiting for. She also does everything to ensure that I can travel despite the situation. She went to see the doctor who treats her, to take a certificate which I have to add to my application.

The mother

A certificate?

The young man

Yes, a pregnancy certificate, a paper signed by the doctor showing that she is pregnant. I also need to add other documents, but I hesitate.

The mother

Why? Do it if that's what they ask.

The young man

It's not that simple, Mum. I am afraid. If I amend the application to include these documents, it will certainly tip the scales in my favour; they would normally treat my case as special, as the birth is coming soon. On the other hand, if I change my application to include these documents, it may slow down the process and further delay the processing of the application. Therefore, I'm not sure. I have already sent emails, but I have not received any response, it is always a machine that answers. The machine has no feelings, it does and says what it has been programmed to do.

The mother

Is that why you went there early this morning? Did you find someone to talk to?

The young man

No, I only heard that they don't plan to reopen for another two months. A guard asked me to wait just in case but ... so I went to cancel the plane tickets for fear of losing them.

The mother

Don't worry, time will take its course, and God's grace will always be with you. Pray much, let us pray for the safe deliverance of your wife. This is a crucial moment when in any case you are powerless. Keep praying, because she doesn't need a visa, she doesn't need to get on a plane. Listen to your wife and give her as much attention as you can. I understand that it is difficult but everything God does is good. But stop smoking, it's not good...

Alone. Lying down. Night-time thoughts. Like a nightmare, as if talking in his disturbed sleep.

The young man

They are talking about a second wave. In the end, nothing is going to get better. They are now arguing over the gender of this virus. As if there was nothing better to do. Should we refer to the covid as him or her? God, I feel like my head is going to explode. I think of this phrase: all human beings are born free and equal. This is not true. The freedom to move anywhere on this small blue planet, which is not even a grain of sand in the universe, is a utopia. I wouldn't be in all this trouble if we could; the visa was just a formality. No, around here it's the key, it even says so on the website. "Getting a visa to enter our territory is a favour, not a right." Go figure that out. We say it is globalisation, we talk about this little global village, but in the end, we barricade ourselves behind big walls, made of tons and tons of paperwork to enter a territory for which we pose no threat.

Bursts of a sour laugh. I am here, my mind wandering there near you. I am like the sparrowhawk who dreams of spreading its shadow over the entire ocean in full flight. I am sad about my laughter. I am Antigone. Yes, I am this Antigone in reverse. I brave the rows, the sleepless nights, and the endless logins to the immigra-

tion website. I am Antigone when she defies Creon, I am an Antigone with a pencil! Every box I fill in on every form makes me feel like I'm being accused. Accused of plotting against the government, accused of being a person at risk, accused of a family reunion. Alas, I am an Antigone in reverse. She simply wanted to give her blood a dignified burial. She wished only to attend the burial, the end of life, but was accused of plotting. I, who only want to witness the advent of life, what would I be accused of? I am Antigone in reverse, but our quests remain the same: to live this moment of humanity, these moments which are undoubtedly the reasons why we are alive.

I was left pending like her. Pending at the machine, until I finally received an e-mail:

Thank you for showing interest in visiting Canada. After carefully reviewing your application for a temporary resident visa and the supporting documents, I find that your application does not meet the requirements of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) and its Regulations. I reject your application for the following reasons:

- I am not convinced that you will leave Canada at the end of your period of stay as a temporary resident under section 179(b) of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations, given the reason for your visit.
- I am not convinced that you will leave Canada at the end of your period of stay as a temporary resident under section 179(b) of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations, given your assets and financial situation.
- I am not convinced that you will leave Canada at the end of your period of stay as a temporary resident under section 179 (b) of the Immigration and Refugee

Protection Regulations, given the limited employment prospects in your country of residence.

- I am not convinced that you will leave Canada at the end of your period of stay as a temporary resident under section 179 (b) of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations, given your current employment situation.

You can reapply if you feel you can address these concerns and prove that your situation meets the requirements. In this case, you will have to pay the processing fee again. Yours sincerely. Visa services – Mexico.

EPILOGUE

Little light of mine

This is it, and I've been waiting for this moment for years
I can already see your little fingers on my chest
And all the happiness they reflect.
It's been hard on your mommy, but she's robust.
You will inherit her sweetness and also her force.
She had already given me a golden life, and now you are the diamond in
our trust.
I'll dedicate my whole life, I'll try to be your guide
You'll call me Dad, but you'll teach me to be a parent at your side
You're not here yet, but your grandmas already have their pick of names
Your mother and I are still arguing about the same.
But there is much more than a chord, much more than a sound effect.
We're already dying to shower you with love.
So, you will carry more than names, you will carry meanings
You'll be called grace; you'll be called strength of God.
I'll call you a vision or a milestone,
I'll call you Anna or Ichema
I'll call you the light that shines from your eyes
I warn you I won't know how to make your hairstyles
So, you'll be a guinea pig until you know what you desire
You are already teaching me humility because you come into the world
quietly
You are coming into the world amid confinement.
I'd watch you suck your thumb for hours
Caress your body gently.
Despite the oceans that separate us
Dad will love you immensely.
This little light of mine
I'm gonna let it shine
You see Daddy is a weak singer.
But you'll have to deal with it.

I'll sing during your bathing.
I'll sing while changing nappies.
I'll sing and read stories before you go to bed.
You will be born far from your home, far from your roots
But know that all of Africa is already in you
And even if you are born into a misogynistic world
Count always on your daddy to watch out for those who disrespect you.
I'll take you to the library.
I will show you the world, the great squares, the museums, the theatres and
especially the cinematheques
I will also take you to the pool
But then your mother is somewhat concerned
She says you'll make me look too sexy; I'll look like a single dad with such
a pretty girl
Which will appeal to everyone.
Despite the oceans that divide us, your parents love each other tremen-
dously.
Mum and Dad do love you and will love you endlessly!
This little light of mine
I'm gonna let it shine.

Bonn, January 2023.

HOW TO UNDERSTAND ONE'S OWN HISTORY — AUSTRIA AND BURKINA FASO

The texts *Inbox*, written by Sidiki Yougbaré from Burkina Faso, and *Salt & Pillars*, written by Thiemo Strutzenberger from Austria, were created during a two-week residency in Bad Ischl in February 2023. The residency took place as part of the Deconfining Arts, Culture, and Policies in Europe and Africa project and during the Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 – European Capital of Culture format. The texts laid the foundation for the further work of the visual artists Thierry Oussou from Benin/Netherlands and Ava Binta Giallo from Cape Verde/Germany and finally for the co-creative theater production directed by Sidiki Yougbaré and Polina Solotwitzki from Germany. The two authors Sidiki Yougbaré and Thiemo Strutzenberger met live for the first time in the European Capital of Culture Bad Ischl and spent two weeks here together. The texts, which were the result of an intensive exchange, deal with the topics of remembrance and the (im)possibility of understanding one's own history. They question their own identities and search for global perspectives for a better future.

In cooperation with Freies Radio B138, the texts were also recorded as an audio track. On October 9, 2024, the two texts were premiered in a merged version as a theater production in Bad Ischl as part of the European Theater Festival as part of the European Capital of Culture programme.

DURING THE DECONFINING WRITERS' RESIDENCY THAT OCCURRED FROM 3 TO 16 FEBRUARY 2023 AS A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT BETWEEN SALZKAMMERGUT 2024 AND OPERNDORF AFRIKA — VILLAGE OPERA, SIDIKI YUGBARÉ FROM BURKINA FASO AND THIEMO STRUTZENBERGER FROM AUSTRIA EMBARKED ON A JOURNEY THROUGH THE DIVERSE LANDSCAPES AND HIDDEN CORNERS OF THE SALZKAMMERGUT REGION, ENGAGED IN MEANINGFUL EXCHANGES WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND ENGAGED IN EXTENSIVE DIALOGUES WITH ONE ANOTHER

SIDIKI YUGBARÉ

Sidiki Yougbaré is the artistic director of the Association Kala–Kala Théâtre and organizer of the Rencontres Internationales de Théâtre en Langues Maternelles (Les RITLAMES). He is an actor, writer, director and film actor. In 2004, he began writing his plays in the local Moore language – the language of the people, of the majority; thus he created a kind of theatre literature that was until then new in his country, Burkina Faso. As a translator, he has adapted and/or translated numerous plays, among others Sophocles' *Antigone*, William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Gustave Akakpo's *A Petites Pierres*, M. Maeterlinck's *La Mort de Tintagilles*, Aristide Tarnagda and Alexandre Kouchevsky's *Mam Gulsda Yamb Depuis Paris*, Edoxi Gnoul's *Retrouvailles*, Aristide Tarnagda's *Façon d'aimer*, etc.

SIDIKI YUGBARÉ

THEATRE INBOX

MONOLOG

A man appears on stage, in his late fifties. He is surrounded by dolls and figurines of all kinds. It is a part of introspection on life and the world during which, the man calls on dolls and figurines to witness.

The man:

When?

When I wonder

When I think to myself

I have insomnia

When?

Questions swarm in my head

Ants of questions

Head full of questions

Introspective questions

Personal questions

Perhaps trivial questions

But yes, questions all the same

When will the World, I wonder

When will Humanity, I wonder

When will the Man, I wonder about

It's just a matter of introspection

I ask myself so many questions that don't give me a glimpse of the answer, that it scares me.

Yes, that worries me a lot

Like a gold miner who shouts on arid land with the certainty of unearthing a grain of gold, brandishing it and shouting...

That's it!!!

I got it!!!

Yes, I finally have it!!!!

I also cry my lungs to ask myself certain obvious questions whose answers escape me.

I feel weariness gaining on me

I feel her fighting me fiercely

A little bit more every day

It can't be seen but I can see it

Alone in my flesh, like a church rat who's in a perpetual struggle with his hunger

With his daily misery

Despite the songs and praises that resound there

I feel it in every little portion of my flesh

I ask myself too many questions

Maybe I should stop

Life is not just about questions

But how can we live without questions

How can we project ourselves without questioning

Living without questions that give us guidelines to follow

Questions that push us to reach new heights

To move mountains

To move towards excellence

Reference questions

Questions that take us back to a common past

This pushes us to better focus on the present to intrinsically address these areas of turbulence that the future is preparing for us

It's not a wish, far from it, but the future will be a boomerang for us

I guarantee it to us if we are not careful!

If we don't change the shoulder gun of our dreams

It is undeniable that we are asking ourselves good questions today

Everyone at their level

Let us ask ourselves in the momentum of this much—maligned uniqueness

Let us pose them with uncovered faces

Let's put our masks down

Certain questions indeed stick uppercuts in our faces to the point that we

often lose our bearings, but that is not a sufficient reason to dodge them.
We will never be able to live without questioning.
I have insomnia
Questions swarm in my head
Ants of questions
I ask myself too many questions
Humanitarian issues
Reporting questions
Societal questions
For every man who dreams of freedom for all
Who dreams that the wind blows for everyone and in all directions
Who dreams of rain for all
Who dreams that the sun shines for everyone without exception, it's
normal
Yes, I know, I'm not the only one
It turns out that I have my little head and my questions
I worry about what bothers me
Of what eats away my sleep
I refuse to wallow in the obvious
Yes, I have insomnia.
Ants of questions in my mind
Day and night
We all have questions we ask ourselves
We all have concerns
Yes, legitimate concerns
Whether you are tall or short
Whether we are wet or dry
We all have dreams that we incubate like ostrich eggs
Dreams that are dear to us
Each of us has a dream
Each of us has a concern
Because each of us has a life
Only one life
And when we know that we only live once, well, we dream
Obviously!
We make certain questions concerns

Have you ever read a corpse's typescript?
No, because he is dead and buried
All his dreams with
His concerns with
Death eats us one by one
And we are buried with our wildest aspirations
Our most pressing concerns
I hardly sleep anymore
I have insomnia
Questions swarm in my head
Ants of questions
I cannot stand it anymore
I'm exasperated
Many times, I have tumbled down the stairs that lead straight to the
canary hidden deep in my soul, drawing even a few droplets of tears to
free myself, but the canary is always dry and I always go back up on the
surface
I return to the surface with my little body invested with my ants of
questions
I go back with my little head loaded with my battalion of questions
Charged with all my Yes
Of all my No's
Of all my does
For what?
Does this mean that?
Yes, but when?
Do you think that?
What do you want?
Do you think that?
Can we, do it?
Do we have the right?
Faced with the lack of adequate responses, I feel the need to bite into my
duvet and empty myself
Roll up the windows in my car, turn on the music loud and clear myself out
Placing my face against the icy belly of a lake and clearing myself out
completely

Yes cry
Just cry
Because they say that crying liberates
Crying provides a feeling of liberation
Maybe I should stop
But how can you stop when questions arise like that out of the blue
They say that a life without questions is not a life
When we live, we must adopt the philosophy of the termite mound which
is that of adding earth to earth
Because this is how the termite mound grows and reaches heights
And then I wonder
Day and night
When are we going to add our piece of the world to this WORLD
Each of us is a world in ourselves
Each of us is a universe in its own right
When shall we add our part of questioning, to the questions that founded
this crumbling world, to put it back on its feet
So that he doesn't go to waste, as the expression says, go crazy
I have insomnia
Questions swarm in my head
Ants of questions
When
When I wonder
When will it be possible for us to follow our dreams to the end, without a
little black feather fluttering from nowhere, to come and erase them and
force us to start again from zero or even no longer have time to take them
back
Yes, I wonder
Day and night
When will it be possible for us to reach the end of our aspirations, without
there being this obscure desire, dirty like a worm which comes to nibble
on them and fade them away?
When will it truly be possible for us
I'm talking about the possible
Possibility of reconciliation
Possibility of cherishing a common aspiration

Possibility of building a common world
To reach out and hug us
To direct our gaze towards new horizons
To contemplate a new sun
An even sun that will not go hand in hand with our fantasies which pollute
our common well-being
Possibility of exploring new spaces
All this, together
well, I said: together
by the word TOGETHER I am not talking about globalization which has
only been a great fiasco
In the word TOGETHER I do not mention this insulting globalization
project
No, these are not these shameless concepts, insidiously cut and plated
like troubadour costumes which fit nobody other than those of their
designers, that we are talking about
I am talking about the possibility of overall action
I am talking about the possibility of participatory action
I am talking about the possibility of common action
Where you give a little piece of yourself
Where I give a little piece of myself
Where he gives a little piece of himself
In the end everyone feels there
In the end each of us finds ourselves there
When
When will the sky of possibility be dotted with clouds of opening
I feel us too withdrawn
Will there soon be a new rain falling on us?
Will a new wind blow on this planet Earth?
Will it be possible for us to do it with our fingerprints
From east to west
From North to South
When will it become this giant canvas that will attract attention
Which would arouse many desires
Will it soon wear tunics in the colours of our dreams?
What are our dreams for this planet

Our common aspirations for the planet
What is the common project that we have for this humanity?
For human being
I have insomnia
Questions swarm in my head
Ants of questions
May the barriers be lifted from now on
May the padlocks be unlocked
So that like the birds, we can melt in with each other and travel our world
without fear
May paths inevitably be traced for us
By the land
From the skies
By the waters
And I will say amen
And you will also say amen
It's a very pious wish
Let us all now leave
May we all be allowed to come and go from now on
Besides, you have to come to my place
Yes, you have to come to my house
The doors of my land are open to you
The doors of my heaven are open to you
Come see the whiteness of the stars in my sky when the night swallows
the universe
Come witness the imperial rising of my sinking every morning when it is
light
For a very long time, my earth and my sky have been waiting for you
Just take a step
You always promise you will come but you never do
Why don't you want to come
It's like you're afraid of something
Why don't you open up
Why do you stay locked up
For what
I feel like I'm forcing your hand

If only you went out a little more often
If only you were willing to open the portal of your life from time to time
If only you admitted that diversity is food for every soul
But no, you reject everything
You say but you don't do it
If you weren't so reluctant, I would have invited you to a painting party
Here
There
Yes, now
I have a big project in mind
I dream of one day becoming a painter
A libertine painter
I dream of drawing a world and dimensioning it to my comfort
Not on a canvas but in real life
I have a vision of a world that the one I live in does not embody
I will invent a new vocabulary in which certain words would not exist

Mess

Confinement

Order

Undergo

Crumble

Despot

Bloodthirsty

Authoritarian

Colon

Totalitarian

Imperialist

Thief

Colonize

Dictatorship

Monarch

Tyranny

Raid

Disdains

Minority

Low people

Interference

Greed

Destruction

Awareness

Mutilated

Let the reign of diktats end
I don't care who thinks what
Who will say what about what
I just dream of it being like this
May the streets of heaven slip from their hands
May this small portion of the sky belong to us all by right
We all have dreams
We all have concerns
I have insomnia
Questions swarm in my head
Ants of questions
When
When I wonder
When are we going to stop hiding behind thoughts and apprehensions
that don't hold water?
When are we going to stop always wanting to elevate ourselves above
others to leer at them like animals?
When will the end of this paternalistic look that we dare to have on
each other
Sisters, brothers
There are barriers to break now
Borders to be twinned in all haste
Stereotype eggs to crack
It is high time that together we think about what is best for the planet
It is high time that together we dream of what is best for human beings
Let us concern ourselves with the essence and meaning of life
Let us worry about the trunk and the sap
Because as they say "the greenery of the foliage is only
decoration"
These are seasonal effects and seasons always follow one another
We embarked on a gearing project that lasted too long
My dearest sister, are you not tired of being there gossiping about life
To run behind an untouchable ideal
While right next to you, a hand is extended to you

My brother, are you not tired of being there polluting the air with your
sighs
A step towards the other is therefore not possible
Getting out of your supposed comfort zone is no longer a possible dream
We have life yes of course, but we do not live it
Let's open our shutters to the external winds
Watch as we finish from the inside
As we look at each other like earthenware dogs
Everyone thinks and believes in their gaze
And it's very palpable
That one is better than the others
That he doesn't need the others
That a solitary life is better for him than being in company
It's a wrong feeling that unfortunately grows day by day.
From year to year
From century to century
It's a very harmful feeling
A feeling that distances us from the Human project
We have to stop it
We have to scold him
Not only do we have to deal with this feeling of mutual rejection
But also, to face the tyranny of time
Who attacks us from everywhere
Who attacks us from all directions
And the time that weighs with all its weight on us
The death comes to take us away one by one like prisoners who are taken
from their holding jail to be slaughtered far away
It seems that the fall of the Berlin Wall did not serve as a lesson to us
Since we are building many others, worse than the physical wall
I have insomnia
Questions swarm in my head
Ants of questions
When
When I wonder
Our internal living space is crumbling
Our aspirations fade away like pollen

Let's give ourselves the strength to laugh
Let us give ourselves the strength to live
To jump all these padlocks that assign us to fear
Let's dare to live simply
Let's not stop ourselves
Let's take a step towards life together
There are so many paths that lead us there
Come on, let's dare to go out
Let's all get out of here
Let's take the big leap
I understand us
I understand us perfectly
I understand us because, in the past, so many winds have punished our
faces and forbidden us to laugh
So many winds by their violence have pushed us to confine ourselves to
our interior spaces
To confine each of us to our own homes
To confine ourselves behind fragments of fabric
To hide in fear
In fear of self
In fear of the other
In fear of everything
To entrench ourselves in the boxes of incommunicability
While dreaming of a world of fusion
While dreaming of a world of colors
How can this be?
Can we talk about fusion when everyone retreats into their inbox
It is true that there was a time when laughing at your neighbor was
impossible, even a taboo.
In the past, it was almost forbidden to pronounce certain words
Compel
To like
Mom
Humanity
Strive
Dream
Light

Dad

Caress

Freedom

Come

Leave

Sun

Happiness

Laugh

Glow

Love

Humility

Well yes, I understand us

But it seems to me that now

It is from this cocoon that we must extricate ourselves

From this straitjacket that we must escape

For a long time, we went around in circles

For a long time, we dreamed but superficially

Questions swarm in my head

Ants of questions

When then

When will we dare to go deeper into our dream for humanity

When will we dare sink the roots of our dream for humanity, for Human, all
the way to the water table

When

When I wonder

We must dare

Because we need it

And it's an imminent need

If we do not dare, we will have to suffer

Others will dare to take the step

They will dare to take the step and we will follow them

We will follow them how far they go

Perhaps there is something ordinary to be found but something beautiful

Something about sound

Of the order of the gaze

On the order of the touch

Something that would sprint in between the palpable and the
metaphorical
I do not know!
Something that would in any case bring a lot to our humanity
To human being, what he needs to open up and smile like a flower in the
sun
On the rail paths that populate our cities, there is perhaps a unifying
anthem to be found
In the middle of this vast field of flour which liquefies on the mountain
peaks, there is indeed a cuddle to be found
But I feel doubtful in us
I feel us wanting one thing and its opposite
I feel us wanting to walk while not wanting to get the soles of our feet
dirty
I feel us wanting to hug each other vigorously while not wanting to
extend our arms
I feel us colliding in mutual fear
With always around the hips this dirty feeling
This feeling of I'm enough for myself
No, no one will be enough alone
I have insomnia
Questions swarm in my head
Ants of questions
I feel tired
Completely exhausted
I need to get out of there a little
I want to take a little recreation
Close my eyes and export myself far away
Go far out there in the Caribbean
Inhale the smell of the sea
Listen to music
The rustle of the Amazon
I've had enough of these questions that narrow me down

What if you took me for a ride
Breathe the fresh air

And if you told me about your city
If you told me your region in a tale
Brag to me about your mother's prowess
Your father's achievements
Do they still live together or have each picked up their clicks and clacks?
I understand them
In other words, we will say that they each deconfined themselves from a
life project that no longer smelled of incense
These cases are legion on earth
Life projects are never easy to maintain
Short!
Take me for a ride
Tell me a bit about yourself
Tell me your story
You still have one
Each of us has a story
I'm not talking about personal experience
I'm talking more about the one that was bequeathed to us
Where did your ancestor come from, where did he go before coming to
settle here
Tell me this story
You never showed me the map of your city with precise explanations, do
you prefer to keep quiet
What these immense mountains which connect to the sky via the clouds
They were formed like this
How many years are they each?
You gave them names
Can you climb them?
It must give a feeling of invincibility once you reach their peaks
I find them imposing
Much too imposing
You and the mountains manage to communicate
To maintain good relationships
I find them docile too
What are all these fields of rails that populate this city?
It's desired

You need this much scrap
Or maybe it's have—you—seen—me
I'm kidding!
I like the whiteness of your city
Although the fear of your sun to take his responsibility exasperates me
I would have loved to see him a little more every day
Why is he hiding behind the clouds
He's like that all the time
Your sun does not dream about freedom
I like suns that take their independence
The suns that take responsibility
Which are displayed
There is no such thing as an independent sun
I also and above all love the relaxing silence of your city
I like its nocturnal whispers
A silence that is far from being a song of mourning
I hardly hear anyone talking
I hardly hear anyone laughing out loud
People are all as silent as the city
Even insects well known for their shrill annoying cries tone down once
night falls
You'd think you were in a No man's land
Sometimes I feel like I'm on Mars
Lying in a tent watching for a mountaineer to pass by to ask me about
news from the earth
I like all of it
I'm going to go out and walk under the streetlights
Walk along these long cold streets
Take a bath in silence
Stretch out my arms and feel the caresses of the air
Clear my head a little
I want to say goodbye to my questions for today
Take leave of my insomnia
From my ants of questions
Tomorrow is a new page
Tomorrow is another day

And I know that my questions will resurface first thing tomorrow
They will besiege me from daybreak
And for that, I have to clear my head tonight
And for that, the air must caress me with its cold hands
Then a short poem that I love to read every night before going to bed
Before going to frolic with the saints, archangels, angels and cherubim

To our world heritage
To the dying inheritance received
The renewed surge of welfare conservatives
To the head-up generation
To distraught aesthetes
To housewives of egalitarian approaches
To the precursors of debauchery
To all real estate agents of nothing and almost nothing
To all the burned heads on the planet
To the promoters of senseless wars
To the shitty Senators
To those entitled to the worst
To all those who strive to make the human species disappear
To the idiot presidents
To the breakers of paternalistic patterns
To the pathetic activists of colonial ideals
To gardeners who fight for the sowing of participatory attitudes
When?
That I wonder
Can you tell me
Bad Ischl little city of lights?

THIEMO STRUTZENBERGER

Thiemo Strutzenberger was born in Kirchdorf an der Krems (Upper Austria) in 1982. He studied acting at the Max Reinhardt Seminar in Vienna with Klaus Maria Brandauer, Hubertus Petroll, Susanne Granzer and René Pollesch. Alongside his training, he worked at the Burgtheater Vienna between 2002 and 2005. He was subsequently working at Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg, Neumarkt Theatre in Zurich, Schauspielhaus Vienna and Basel Theatre. In 2014, he was nominated for the Austrian Nestroy Theatre Prize for *Best Actor*.

Strutzenberger completed a Master's degree in Gender Studies at the University of Vienna in 2014 and took part in the FORUM Text programme at uniT (Graz). His play *The Zofen Suicides* premiered in 2010, followed by the world premieres of *Queen Recluse* and *Hunde Gottes* at the Schauspielhaus Wien in 2013 and 2014. He directed his first theatre piece in 2017 at Theater Basel, where he was in-house author in 2018/2019. This was followed in 2020 by the world premieres of his plays *Wiederauferstehung der Vögel* at Theater Basel and *Der Preis des Menschen* at Munich's Residenztheater. He has been working at the Munich Residenztheater since 2019.

Thiemo Strutzenberger was part of the Graduate School of Gender Studies at the University of Basel and received his doctorate in 2021.

In 2018, he was invited to the Berlin Theatertreffen in Ulrich Rasche's production of *Woyzeck*. In 2020, his play *Wiederauferstehung der Vögel* was invited to the festival radikal jung. In 2021, Thiemo Strutzenberger received the 3sat Prize for his performance in Stefan Bachmann's production of *Graf Öderland*, which was also invited to the Theatertreffen.

THIEMO STRUTZENBERGER

SALT & PILLARS

1 SIDIKI

The stage is a kind of recreation of the K&K Hofbeisl. At first, there is only a podium, sliding away from the grasp of the music and fog. The dance floor. A screen is on the podium, showing a jaguar on the prowl. One of the performers.

1

I come here and we say hello and get to know each other. You speak French and I don't even it speak it halfway.

Someone, who is filming us, tells us that we should stand up or go, while we are talking, on a walk through Ischl, along the Traun, along the Pfarrgasse, to the abandone Lehartheater. We can understand each other, but it is hard to deal broadly with differentiated, complex contexts without misunderstandings and without throwing in the towel.

Shortly after we have met each other, we are sitting in a bookstore and are being filmed.

I notice that as soon as I want to ask about your circumstances, Burkina, the Operndorf, Ouagadougou, your work, your life, your topics only general questions occur to me.

I don't feel anything when I ask myself what the Salzkammergut region has to do with Burkina Faso. We make plans that we want to make plans.

You say, after you have explained something, politique, politique, politique

as if that were not everything that makes up your existence and to what extent is it rude to appoint you the ambassador of your country and its situation, to what extent is it impossible to appoint me the ambassador of my country?

We could perhaps be ambassadors to each to a small extent, listeners, reporters.

We converse primarily with silence and I speak in simple sentences, largely alone with the language barrier between us. Toward the end of our time here, you say cousin, then brother, during the radio interview you say, twin brother.

As we walk through Ischl and are given some information about the history of the city and the world, how a signature of the Emperor initiated the First World War here, I say to you often that I do not know how k & k and colonialism in Africa fit together now. And you say that you don't know either.

You suggest that we write a play about the workers in the salt mine the story begins 750 years before the birth of Christ and then the play keeps on going over the entire course of history, until today. And that is my part of the play and you write your part of the play, beginning in Burkina 750 years before the birth of Christ and then you go through the entire history and, at the end, we are sitting in one of our hotel rooms, in mine or in yours. And you say: that is the connection.

You come into my room before I leave. You are there while I am packing, sitting on the sofa. We don't have any burning questions. And there is no job and no obligations and all concerns don't come until after these simple, motiveless. I have to go. And you are still staying.

2 PETER ALEXANDER

A dance floor. The five performers gradually ask the individual members of the audience to be their dance partners. They sway to the music "The Little Bar" by Peter Alexander. The stage is covered by fog. A deer appears, standing, mythical and majestic.

3 WINDOW

The text slowly blends with the music.

1

My feet on the asphalt tap down the steep path to the sea that I charge into.

3

Sand, clay, stones

4

I leap from the wooden tower into the velvet green water

1

The reeds and the fish that discover looking into the water from the shore

2

I recite a poem by Schiller, from a blanket, put on like a coat, one evening, during one of our performances or *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, something like that

1

I am wearing my cousin's dress that evening, blue, plain material and walk through the rows, we are performing sketches and I am the host, no one is particularly annoyed, doesn't anyone

4

Between the trees, on an area made of grass, the fire that we are camped around, the hut standing by itself and the secret of the trees, of the forests while wandering with torches through the night.

2

I am sitting at a table brimming with stability in the dining hall, in front of me the old script that I am learning.

3

My grandparents wrote their letters in it before they slowly changed to the Latin script

1

Twenty years later, I am learning the script again to decipher the letters. They are about their big German dreams, about their love, their crises, their hope in the war, their belief in the Führer and in National Socialism.

4

My grandmother gave me the letters, that she copied into a book, fifteen or twenty years ago.

2

Even today I still haven't managed to translate them all the way to the end.

1

Who are they for?

3

She says I should do something with them sometime, what is she thinking about?

4

I am at the lake in the summer.

2

I come from the path and the stones under the water.

4

We lift the material. I hold it in my hand like a log. Like a child, holding another child.

5

We hang the log on the line. And one of us pulls it up while the other holds it and watches as the material unfold, see whether it is hanging properly so that it can glide upward with no hindrance.

3

We hang up the wood and one of us reaches for the line. We are children in a photograph. My twin sister and I hoist the flag.

2

One holds the wood and, during this, the other pulls on the line and the material unfolds.

4

I am wearing Lederhosen and watching reverently. And she is in a Dirndl.

5

The wood holds the material, valiantly, full of reverence.

3

She raises the material. She unfolds the material by hoisting it.

4

It hangs on the line

1

like the stones spread out between the feet and like the sand under the water while I am surrounded by it and covered and I dive under the surface to hold my breath, dive until I can hold my breath for a long time.

4

Below the surface over which the moon is rising, which will be extolled because it is rising. And we sing all of the other songs.

2

The stall aroma of the songs and dances, the equipment upon which we do gymnastics, the rows in which we stand, the looks and images, the big and the little, the community surrounding the families, in them, between them

4

I don't know what the people doing gymnastics are thinking about

1

The materials rose like an inverse no-driving sign and it rises and many people stepped into the square

5

When the customer left one who drowned in the lake while swimming, like he often swam, once over the lake, every day.

2

I don't know why I am ashamed about that

4

The little bit of nationalism, the little bit of great German dreams. The little bit of glorifying the past

5

The material is hanging, the air is standing, the people are standing and looking at each other. We raised it.

2

The sun has risen.

5

My twin sister and I raise the flag so that it blows in the wind, for the day and it is lowered again at night so that it can be raised again the next day.

1

There are streamers and the streamers from the neighbouring regions are supposed to be stolen. They are made out of velvet like the water and have insignias, probably embroidered from golden threads, bears and deer

5

It is about the game of the misappropriation of the honour of the territories for which the streamers are a symbol.

3

A game for boys who are going hunting.

2

So that they, who are standing around them can look at them, see them. Immerse themselves in them.

1

Black red yellow.

5

Holy Ernst. My Lederhose, her Dirndl. Or in white shorts and tank tops. Or in blue synthetic suits, the girls and women, with leggings.

4

I roll with my cousin over the mattresses to explore our bodies, her refreshment, but I believe this cousin was actually never here.

3

The climbing through one's sweetheart's window in folk dancers. Four arms that contort so that boys and girls can look through the arms that form the window.

4

The talk of war, across the border, not far from here. The splashing, the glittering of the sun on the water, the green of the endless area between two forests, how far can on go?

3

And so lay down your brothers in God's name

3

As we raised the flag in the morning, the news circulated that a visitor to the family camp had drowned in the lake during their morning crossing of the lake.

4

We approach the moor

1

In swimming trunks to the reef, maybe we have backpacks with drinks in them

5

There we plunge into the earth

3
Out of the moor, black faces and arms and upper bodies of the children
and we rub ourselves with liquid earth, white around the eyes

1
We sit on clumps that you don't sink on, but instead quietly stand. You
must respect the sharp-cutting reed, the broken-off stalks.

2
We are standing on clumps of earth, they are Mohrenköpfe, the heads of
moors, as they say

3
No one asks where the moors left their bodies

4
There are no Jews where we danced in our folk costume and raised the
flag

5
I saw the bodies of the gymnasts Like statues, busts

4
Someone has drowned.

2
It hangs and drags; I pull it up.

4
I am the one hundred millionth of the descendants and it is normal for
everyone and it works for everyone and it is nothing.

INTERLUDE UNO

3
I am thinking about the images of masculinity in Hollywood films from the
1940s.

And I ask myself the extent to which they elaborate a specific non-German
form of masculinity.

George Mosse suggests, I believe, that genealogically hardly any differ-
ence can be found between masculinity and militarism.

Mosse wrote: "No matter whether they were Christian or Greek or both,
military virtues were always present: at the end of the day, the masculine

stereotype was created in revolutions and wars. Heroism, death and sacrifice were just as much associated with masculinity as discipline [...] The soldiers of France came, just like the volunteers that fought in the Prussian army against the French, from all classes of the population [...] The so-called martial ideals themselves were disseminated by the intelligentsia, primarily officers who came from the upper and middle classes. The modern soldier was now, together with the Greek young people and athletes, the model for masculinity.”

The soldiers, the mass of weapons, used up their history, their hope and pains I am sitting with a friend in a bar and we are talking about these archetypically good male figures as they appeared in Hollywood films from the 1940s. The three returning soldiers in *Best Years of Our Lives*, the US–American soldiers in *Battleground*, Rick in *Casablanca*, the miners in *How Green Was My Valley*, the priest in *Going My Way*, the journalist in *Gentlemen’s Agreement*.

What I find moving in the films is less what happens directly in association with the war, but instead much more the resolute gentleness of the men.

I notice how in these masculinities, a kind of archetype of the good and reparative is realized

They move me, perhaps in an unreasonable and uncritical way

Usually so much that I cry

Different from the Hollywood masculinities of the 1950s.

4 SCISSORS

2

Children at play stand between trees and bushes. And they run back and forth between the trees. From one tree to the next. In the game *Schneider Schneider leich ma d’Scha (Tailor, Tailor, Lend Me Your Scissors)*, the children playing change places while a single child watches. While doing so, the child leans against the trunk of the tree with both hands covering both eyes so that the child cannot see. The watching child turns around quickly after having said their sentence.

If, however, another child is moving and has not reached any of the other trees, this homeless, wandering child who has not arrived at any tree has somehow lost and is eliminated.

And thus, this child becomes the next child that has to watch.

There is a version of the game where there is no child that watches, but instead the child stands with their back to the others walking around and asks for a pair of scissors that are not giving to them.

The child is told to ask their neighbours.

We have played this thousands of times.

INTERLUDE DUO

)

In David Marton's production of *Capriccio* by Richard Strauss that I see in Munich, some six people are singing to decide whether music or text is the most important thing for an opera. A duchess, a composer, a poet, a philosopher, a singer, a theatre director or regisseur and so on gush about themselves in self-referential effusions. It is hard to believe that Strauss composed the last of his operas in 1942 without any reference to the political events of the day. The production, however, makes the deportations of old and undesired people visible. The Jewish ballet dancers and their fragile bodies are disposed of, no one notices it or does anything. The sung debate about art continues, concerned only with itself.

In the end, the deported people ultimately return and are wearing white clothing. Ghosts. The duchess bursts out with questions about which of the two men she is standing between she should decide on now. After a while, she notices the murdered people who have appeared. She notices them. They attract her eye. She notices the deported old woman. She is standing next to the murdered young dancer. Does she remember or is she only seeing herself again in the mirror?

She moves as a mirror image with the delicate, fragile old woman who appears to the duchess wearing a silver, silk bathrobe.

The old woman positions herself at the conductor's podium on the stage, which is part of the set design, which the duchess also tried out earlier. The murdered old Jewish woman, very thin, raises and lowers her arms and conducts the orchestra. The duchess comes to her, they hold each other's hands. It is probably cheesy. It moves me and I cry.

Somewhere, I hear: the dead need our tears to reach the other side.

5 BUTTERFLY & JAGUAR

2

I am reading Jamaica Kincaid, who is writing about her brother: which of his different egos makes him the happiest?

1

A friend left me a note in a book by Proust, a greeting. On it was a line from a song by Blumfeld. It said: Butterfly. Come home.

4

In *Responsibility and Judgment*, Hannah Arendt said, embedded within complex philosophical argumentation, that the Holocaust is something that should not have happened.

2

The simplicity of this sentence is surprising. I hear it in the car.

3

It is one of my scarier dreams, in which I am standing near my grandparents' house.

2

Somewhere in the Upper Austrian countryside at night.

4

It reveals a black figure that is walking around.

1

A black lion.

2

The meadows are lying peacefully.

4

It is quiet

5

The figure goes

1

it makes me dizzy

2

Dizzy is what a friend says about things and ways of behaving that are difficult to assess and that do not provide any proper sense, do not work or are not thought out.

4

A lion is walking around that is pitch black.

1

The Holocaust is something that should not have happened.

5

I imagine that an entire generation is coming and it will do not nothing other than be sad

2

Out of the dark
Into the light

6 CATERINA VALENTE

The performers dance with each other on stage, they sway to the music. Gold tinsel descends, blue tinsel follows. The song “Play Habanero one more time for me” by Caterina Valente is played.

(DE)CONFINED IS A TEXT BORN FROM
THE CREATIVE COLLABORATION OF
TWO AUTHORS, SALIMATA TOGORA
AND KATHRINE NEDREJORD, DURING THE
BODØ2024 WRITERS' RESIDENCY, AS
PART OF THE DECONFINING PROJECT.
THIS IS ONE OF THE TEXTS THAT
WILL BE TRANSFORMED INTO PHYSICAL
LIVE PERFORMANCES AND THEATRE
PRODUCTIONS IN A LATER PHASE OF
THE DECONFINING PROJECT

SALIMATA TAGORE AND KATHERINA NEDREJOD

(DE) CONFINING

KATA: What are you waiting for?

SALSA: I'm collecting my thoughts...

KATA: Our text needs to be done by Friday

SALSA: There's something kind of pitiful about how we're approaching it

KATA: What could be pitiful about writing a text together?

SALSA: We don't have the same limitations, KATA:

KATA: Kathrine...

SALSA: See what I mean?! Where I come from, we give nicknames to the people we like. This isn't going to work. There are too many cultural differences... By the way, it's not *pitiful*, it's *pitiful*

KATA: Whatever, I write in Norwegian anyway

SALSA: But you live in France so you need to learn to master the language there

KATA: Okay, Mme. Paule. Can we move on?

SALSA: Who's Mme. Paule?

KATA: My French teacher in middle school

SALSA: You started learning French in middle school? Seriously?

KATA: I guess it was the same thing for you with English, but the only word you learned was "hello", right?

SALSA: Cut it out

Silence

KATA: So what do you want?

SALSA: I don't want anything. We're talking about what limits us, nothing else

KATA: To be honest, it's kind of relaxing and limiting at the same time

SALSA: True

Silence

KATA: It's not your day, is it?

SALSA: Yes, it is.

KATA: So...?

SALSA: Why do *I* have to be the one who starts?

KATA: I'm interested in what you stand for. And also, I invited you (along)

SALSA: The best excuse in the world. Don't mind me, dear, just get on with it

KATA, SALSA: , let's just do what we agreed

SALSA: ?

KATA: Your nickname. You see, I'm learning

SALSA: Why are you guys so peaceful now? Vikings used to be real warriors, right?

KATA: First of all, I'm not a Viking, and second of all, because that was like 800 years ago

Silence

KATA: Yes?

SALSA: Whoever said it was stupid to be scared of a blank sheet of paper was an idiot

KATA: Yeah

SALSA: I think maybe we should try something else....

KATA: Like what?

Silence

SALSA: By the way, did Norway help finance that “Viking” series?

KATA: I don’t think so

SALSA: The producer must have been from Norway, though

KATA: Why do you say that?

SALSA: I mean, that show is damn good advertising for you!

KATA: There aren’t any Vikings anymore

SALSA: But they’re your forefathers, you must be proud of them! Even I would’ve liked to make a similar show about the history of the Mandinka people

KATA: What would it be about?

SALSA: My dear, that story would be a complete socio-logical analysis of sub-Saharan Africa

KATA: Are you from the Sahel?

SALSA: I’m from Mali...

KATA: And things are okay there now?

SALSA: The usual...

KATA: I want to travel around Africa

SALSA: It’s too warm where I’m from

KATA: It’s too cold here

Silence

SALSA: Okay, let’s take a different approach: if it’s hard to talk about borders, we can talk about dreams. What do you dream about?

KATA: Winning the Nobel Prize in Literature

SALSA: You have to believe it yourself

KATA: I will win the Nobel Prize in Literature!

SALSA: We’ll get there, dear KATA: , we’ll get there, but first, we have to be read aloud at the festival... And if we don’t have a text...

KATA: Nada

Silence

SALSA: Art has to get *involved*, it has to be a propaganda tool, and it has to ask questions. I write for the theatre because I care.

KATA: Yes, I've noticed that. It's almost like you advocate from the stage

SALSA: In times like these, we have no choice but to scream the silence away

KATA: A suffocating silence

SALSA: A nagging silence

KATA: So get going, then, SALSA:!

SALSA: My voice resonates with both a hope and a challenge,

The voice that no one is used to hearing

Becomes a cry from a hollow in my gut;

A cry of repressed anger, off course, *illegal*,

A diluted complaint, but still necessary, absolutely necessary.

So unfair – to be choked by crying without tears

I shout into the wind, which carries my message away

To our forefathers, gone for far too long, that they must come back and save us.

It is time to take a breath, to breathe in the freedom.

My complaint is not selfish; it is imperative that I smile.

I smiled for a long time – mute, blind and deaf

To leave behind all the bitterness in the words, the looks, the gestures, the contempt and the loss,

That made me so provocatively, overwhelmingly different, Like a crime wherever I went.

I was a wreck at the finish line, devoid of shape and features,

Wanting to be liked to find peace.

To be liked to crawl back into my shell,

To be liked to become invisible;

Is there something in me I haven't sold to be liked enough?

Do you want me to shout?

KATA: Shout!

SALSA : I can only cope with it onstage
Where anything goes, where everything is art,
The only place I can be real;
Unshackled from the irons that hinder my march,
From the invisible chains that strangle my voice.
Why am I not good enough for the world?
Why are the children of Africa, this land where everyone
is welcome, thrown out no matter where they go?
Why do I need to have millions in the bank and a sky–
high salary to get a visa?
Why, while others get to travel around the world and
conquer it, do I only have a TV screen? Why do I have to
swallow everything it spews out?
Why is the wealth from my fields welcomed, while my
siblings and I are stopped at the border?
Why do they gorge themselves on my music, on Oumou
Sangaré, Salif Keita, Ali Farka Touré, but deny my own
creativity?
Why do they criticize me for being lazy when they them–
selves have been involved in crushing and killing those
who fought for my independence:
Modibo Keita, Nkyuma Nkrumah, Thomas Sankara, Amilca
Cabral, Patrice Lumumba...?
Why do they criticize me for depending on the help they
give me but trample my own strength to pieces?
Why do we still have to pay in francs?
Why does an entrepreneur get a 15% interest rate?
Why do we never have the means to use our mines, but
have to give 80% of them to others?
Why didn't we let in Kidal?
How can the Security Council deliberate over Africa's
destiny when Africa itself lacks the power of veto?
Why do they treat us like small children, like their children?
Why do they dismiss us every time we dismiss the politi–
cian who represents them?
Why is everything they see about us on TV law–break–

ing, misery, powerlessness, so the world thinks we aren't capable of anything else?

Why don't they ever talk about what works?

Why does their support for the artist depend on her saying what they want to hear?

Why do they judge me without knowing me?

Why does it continue?

KATA: Why do you care so much about what they think?

SALSA: If I do not rouse disgust, I rouse pity,

If I do not rouse contempt, I rouse fear.

This colour, heavy in all its blackness,

This mane, intrusive and inappropriate,

Even before I become a person, they want to decide what I am.

No, I'm not complaining;

People have had enough of my tears.

I dream because I still have the right to!

Quick recap

I dream of going to Norway, of discovering snow and the serenity of the landscape;

I get a visa valid for one year

For one year, I will travel across Europe, America and Asia,

I will disappear in the crowd, anonymous and invisible,

I will just be *me*, no name, no colour, no prejudice,

I'll be able to make mistakes and people will say it's only human,

To burst out laughing without shocking anyone,

To respond to insults and people will think it's normal;

I'll be able to walk into a cafe without people staring

And I'll get the best seat in the house without having to pay in advance.

I just want to be one thing: A writer.

To write works in the spirit of Agatha Christie, Amadou

Hampaté Bâ and Maryse Condé,
Works that enter the global literary canon and make me
rich and famous;
I write to change the world and shake souls,
Through them, people will see Africa shine with culture
and human dignity.
I want to talk about love, about tolerance, about wom-
en's rights, about the street where I grew up, about
Lafiabougou;
I want to talk about the red market in Bamako and the
murals in Ségou,
I want to be published in enormous print runs and sold
all over the world.

When I can finally make a living from art
I'll no longer have to find a job,
I'll no longer have to argue with my boss
Or be insulted by my superior calling me useless in front
of everyone.
When I'm famous, I'll dedicate my books – my best-
sellers – to them,
While I forget old grudges and slanders of the past.

I'll travel first class with my kids,
I'll chair conferences simply because I'm so eager to share,
I will no longer get up at four in the morning to write.
And I will no longer have days like this: six o'clock mak-
ing breakfast for the kids, eight to five writing reports in
an office, five o'clock picking up the kids from preschool,
six o'clock making dinner, seven o'clock doing home-
work, ten o'clock in bed, too exhausted to write.
I'll have servants, drivers, and the whole day free for
writing.
I'll be pretty and smile and never be lonely in the crowd
of characters I bring to life.
I'll be a fantastic mother.

I'll have a garden where I can plant flowers and call them love.
They let happiness grow wherever they're planted.

Silence

I live in a country without war.
The people who live in far-off villages from the north to the south cultivate their fields and move around easily.
We are no longer red-listed as a country you should stay away from...
Once again, Sinagouya is appreciated as a tradition that binds society together,
My children will have plenty of food, get an education and help from a healthcare system that works;
when they get sick, we no longer have to travel so they can get help;
In our houses, we have electricity and water that isn't always being cut off,
In our cities, we have big, well-maintained roads that don't cover our faces in dust,
In every municipality, there are green parks, theatres and cinemas,
At school, children are taught about Domo so they learn about the value of integrity from an early age.
Corruption and embezzlement no longer exist.
We are responsible citizens who no longer let others decide how we should be governed,
United we stand, prepared to face our foe.
We review contracts and work for the common good,
And every person does their duty with unwavering effort and discipline.
People no longer come to Africa just to find gold and oil, giraffes and infants;
They come to shop and look around, to study and go on vacation.

All the people who died in the Mediterranean, all the horrors of terrorism, all the religious extremism... all of this becomes only dark legends we tell at wakes because we mustn't ever forget.

The children don't have to face the barriers that were there when they were born,

And never have to see the worry in their mother's eyes.

Wakanda is no longer a dream, but a real city.

SALSA : , your voice touches me.

I don't dare write lines for you because I don't have the power you do, because I'm a lost European who fled from one country to another – that's a long and boring story so I won't get into it here – so I'll write a monologue, most of what I write is monologues anyway, and when I hear your voice, SALSA : , I hear so many other voices, and it all intertwines, and I think of my friend Amina in Tanzania, which is closer to Mali than to France, than to Norway, but still far away, Amina who I first met as a sixteen year old who ruled the block, who set the first person who tried to contradict her in his place, who wouldn't be silenced, who had such a playful look to her, who had been so good and mischievous at the same time at school, and I like the mischievous students better than the ones who just passively read back whatever's on the syllabus, and that's how Amina was, and she had such a power, such a strength in her, a strength that I envy – no, not envy – because I'm glad she has it, and I think of my friend Elham in the Iranian part of Kurdistan who has the same power, they are unifying elements, they carry their whole block, neighborhood, family and friends on their shoulders and it's heavy, and they have this obstinate look in their eyes, and they have master's degrees, and Elham has at least two, and they can't get jobs because they live in countries that actively discriminate against married women, so they have to spend their energy on all these other things, lifting, holding, and that's how it was for my áhku, that's

the Sámi word for grandmother, because I'm also that, by the way, SALSA : , and you may not know what Sámi is, a lot of people don't, but it's the only indigenous people in Europe, and áhkku was Sámi and my mother is Sámi and I'm Sámi, and my áhkku was like Amina and Elham, she was a force and an engine, and she wasn't allowed to study because she was a woman, because the quotas were only given to men at the time, and she was from a poor family that spent what little money they had on books, mostly in a language that wasn't theirs, a bit like French is for you and your people, SALSA : , that's how Norwegian was for my áhkku and her family and friends at the time, that language associated with literature, with progress or decline, and she wasn't allowed to study so she had to get married and have children and live her strength through her domestic life, but also more, always more, and she waited and waited until the children grew up and no one could deny her that education anymore, and she was always saying to us, to her granddaughters, go to school, make something of yourself, then freedom will come, but that's not true is it, not for everyone, Elham and Amina went to school, they know so much, they are capable, mischievous students, have their degrees, but lack the freedom that should come with them, that áhkku promised me would come with education

SALSA : Life is a drama!¹

KATA : I might be writing this because this realization of how arbitrary the world is can make me cry, over and over again, it makes me cry

SALSA : Helen likes that too. Helen was my supervisor at La Chartreuse, Helen cried about the racism against black people in Namibia. Her landlady had a black lover and she despised him because he was black... outside of the sheets, that is.

KATA : You know, every time you want to say something

¹ Quote by Amadou Hampaté Bâ

racist in Norway or France, you start like this: I'm not racist, I have a black friend, I have a black ex, I have a black neighbour and I always say hi to her, as if a relationship, even a toxic and unbalanced one, gives you the right to insult an entire people. As if you collect relationships for rhetorical or political purposes to try to win an argument later.

I never cry for them. For Amina, for Elham, for áhkku, for their obstacles, for all the potholes they ran into along the way...

But SALSA: what good are a few pitiful tears in Europe? They don't mean anything – I get messages from friends in Iran who are protesting and afraid and want this freedom of mine and I want to send it to them, but it can't be wrapped, the post office refuses to send it by registered mail, and I stand there with it feeling stupid and powerless, and then I go home and try to write a text that might contain at least *some* of this. I think I'll have to change their names, by the way, my friend's names, even though this text is hardly likely to reach the authorities in their countries, I don't want to take any chances, and anyway, now I've changed their names so they're safer. But I can be called KATA: , I can write my name without fear, I have the freedom my áhkku wanted for me. By the way, KATA: is a name I inherited from my áhkku. And in the Sámi culture, we say that we inherit more than a name, we inherit a part of the person who had it before us. I hope I carry some of my áhkku inside me.

And maybe I can cut freedom in two, maybe I can cut it into four, a hundred pieces, and try to send it like that, piece by piece until it can be built up for real, but that's not how freedom works.

SALSA: Freedom can't be divided, dear sister. Freedom is like happiness, like love. The more you give it away, the more it will grow. Freedom is a burning candle used to light others. KATA: I wish I never grew out of the idea that all these

abstract ideas have a physical form.

Oh, how I wish I could be a child and never again have to understand the complexity of these ideas! Freedom, freedom.

And because I take on guilt by nature, I sometimes think that my freedom comes at the expense of theirs, SALSA : . But that's not true, SALSA : . Freedom is a well with no bottom, SALSA : . SALSA : , SALSA : , SALSA : , that's like the beginning of a song.

KATA : , KATA : ... that's the abbreviation for the word "catastrophe". At least in French, the language I speak the most after Bamanankan, which is a national language but not an official one. I write in French, it's the only written language I know, and another thing that allows my people to understand me. I feel guilty too, you know, I feel guilty because I don't give them enough of what they want from me. But how can someone give something they don't even have themselves? When you can no longer give, well, you stop giving. Sometimes the woman is elevated to a queen so she can be a greater sacrifice. A queen trapped by the weight of expectations. Everyone says I could be a queen when it comes to renunciations. But that's another story, KATA : . Now I'm listening to you, sister.

KATA : In kingdoms, in democracies, in republics, in dictatorships, in all forms of society everywhere, women are the ones who take the blame. The shame.

I could say: I feel sorrow for these women, but there's too much *I* in that sentence. I want to say: Their society feels sorrow for these women. Their society loses something every day when it sets them aside, declares them second-class, forces them to repress everything that is simmering inside them. Their society cries for all the women it doesn't get to feel the impact of. Without them, their society is grayer, more one-dimensional, an emptier, duller character in an emptier, duller play.

They used to call áhku my grandfather's farmhand

because she did everything women shouldn't do. She sewed, knitted, took art classes, she painted and hammered and breastfed, she cooked, she translated documents from Norwegian to Sámi so my grandfather could understand, she became a politician, a women's rights activist, she fought for Sámi rights in a Norwegian society that wanted to see the Sámi disappear – I think of her every March eighth in particular, and that was yesterday – she ended up at the bottom of the list for the municipal council elections – the men put themselves and their buddies at the top –

But she got so many personal votes² that she did become a leader. And Amina and Elham and everyone who can't visit me in Europe as I've been able to visit them in their countries several times cannot.

There are other obstacles, but they're similar.

And a secret, SALSA: , from Europe, from Norway, is that when discrimination is officially abolished, it still doesn't disappear completely. Old laws lurk and tremble beneath the surface. Racism is banned in Europe, but racism exists everywhere in Europe. Equality is the template in Europe, the aristocracy has ceased to exist, but those in charge still wear suits and own castles and make money from generations of colonization.

If you visit, someone might try to tell you that Norway was never a colonial power, but of course that's a lie, my people, the Sámi, lost their lands and rights, language and culture when Norwegians needed more land – But every time I mention this, they say it was worse in other countries.

Take France, for example, they might argue they were much worse than us.

And in France, they can say Belgium, for example, they were much worse than us.

² "Personstemmer": Personal votes are a system that voters can use in municipal and county council elections in Norway to influence which people are elected to municipal and county councils.

And in Belgium, they can say that at least they never made gas chambers.
And someone is always worse.
This is also how criminals talk.
This is how the criminal who defends himself in the trial speaks.
SALSA : SALSA : music.
KATA : KATA : Catastrophe, ah, the music's starting...
That's OK.

Music

KATA : Last week, my people sat down in front of the buildings in the government quarter in Norway and said: Enough is enough, now we want sovereignty over our lands again. And the gray-faced ministers talked their empty politician talk and really wanted to say: We don't have time to go back to colonialism now. But it grew and grew, and more people came, they sat there in their gáktis, our national dress, colorful and woolen, you can google them.

SALSA : I've seen them, KATA : , I've seen them. I dig the look.

KATA : It's the most beautiful garment I know, the only outward sign that we're not Norwegians like them, and finally, at the end of the week, the minister said: Sorry. We didn't get our land back. It costs too much money to really decolonialize, but the right words are free, but we got something. One word. Sorry.

Do they really mean it?

SALSA : If they do, why don't they just stop it? The past becomes easier to forgive when it's over, but he evil just gets new names, names like neocolonialism. In my country, we just want it to end, but they refuse to let us mourn all the time we've lost. Amadou Hampaté Bâ said: We must close our eyes to the mistakes of mankind and

take only the good with us. Unfortunately, they stop us from erasing the past and shedding light on the future. The struggle continues!

We will be áhkku, Amina and Elham; we will never bend and never be bound, but demand the impossible so that the apology will be more sincere.

Are we finished, dear KATA : ?

KATA : The text is finished.

SALSA : And the festival?

KATA : More or less in the box.

SALSA : I told you, dear friend, we're on our way to a Nobel Prize

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