

Martha MUKAIWA

Essays

THE SOLITAIRES

No one knows when the women stopped dating.

It was gradual, incremental, like the move from twilight to sundown that ends with the world going dark.

At first it was just a catch phrase. A status liked forty times.

A tweet echoing endlessly into the cybersphere that seemed to give life to what Namibian women were thinking as the headlines announced that their species was rapidly becoming endangered.

Historians would trace the phrase back to Esther Vei Beukes, a young blogger who'd read about the gruesome stabbing of a pregnant woman by her husband in the wake of a murder of a female pastor by a man thought to be her boyfriend and took to Facebook to post four words.

“Stay single, stay alive.”

Some people laughed, others stayed silent but with every thumbs up, something was stirring in Namibian women's souls that recognised the truth of the words as broken bodies lay piled high in morgues for the simple crime of daring to dump or argue or annoy.

Slowly but surely, Namibian women turned inwards.

Bars frequented by locals emptied of anything with breasts, cocktail dresses swung silently in shop windows rustled lightly by an ill wind and women banded together at martial arts classes, feminist book clubs and at grim-faced protests that held Esther's words high.

Good men who had never hurt a fly found themselves rebuffed by every kind of woman who feared that any love allowed to grow and then unexpectedly grind to a halt would end in their end while good women gave up all hope of love to spend their days gnashing their teeth, wincing at headlines and doing their best to fuel the fancy of foreigners.

People threw opinions like grenades in guerilla wars.

The men blamed the women.

The women blamed the men.

They all blamed the government, gender inequality, patriarchy, miniskirts and madness while still more covered under the curse of an invisible God.

Waiting it out, sending up prayers, counting the bodies.

Art that wasn't drenched in blood and indignation was labelled trite, disrespectful, irrelevant and irresponsible but the poets, the writers, the singers and visual artists knew that there are only so many ways you can reimagine hell.

The world turned.

Namibian men burned with shame or the shock of the blood on their hands and women gained back control the only way they knew how.

They stopped.

Stopped loving.

Stopped dating.

Stopped being the light and bright beings that had ever enchanted men since the first.

It wasn't the answer but it was a way.

It was loneliness and against nature but it was peace.

They called themselves The Solitaires.

They splashed Esther's slogan all over the city in graffiti, on posters and on big billboards on the sides of buildings and when a woman sought them out, beaten, bruised and on the brink of her demise, they acted.

They found him.

They beat him.

They reproduced every mark he had made on the woman's body and tied him to a traffic light in the centre of the city.

Naked. Noiseless. And with a Queen of Spades stuck tightly to his chest.

It would take less than two hours for his image to find its way to every newsfeed on social media. Passersby would take his photograph, spit at his feet then upload his picture and hashtag it #womanbeater which everyone equated as one step away from #murderer.

From that day on, he would be shunned.

Right of Admission reserved signs would swing steadily in his face at every bar, shop and shebeen until he was forsaken.

Until he was just as alone and just as afraid as the women who stifle their screams with their pillows at night.

And hide their bruises with make-up in the morning.

PAA JOE AND THE WORLD

Paa Joe Ashong isn't particularly impressed by death.

Car wrecks, witchcraft, a mundane keeling over. He says as much kicking up dust in his workshop in Greater Accra, drowning big hunks of *fufu* in bright red stew, his trickling English spilling out between swallows.

He wants to know how I'd like to be buried.

What form my coffin would take if God, in his infinite wisdom, spirited me away.

I suggest a pen although I've toyed with the idea of cremation but the famous fantasy coffin maker scoffs at the suggestion.

"For a writer, a computer, a laptop!

"It's your work!

"Your life."

Ghana is the first place I ever wanted to go.

I'm nine years old, my school friends have just returned from a holiday programme in the West African nation and something twists in my stomach as I listen to them gloat over their haul of traditional games, wooden trinkets and mesmerizing patterned cloth.

The details of their stories punctuated with whoops of laughter are long forgotten but the hue has stayed with me for twenty-three years.

Warm and orange as the wooden bird gathering dust in Paa Joe's showroom. A coffin not unlike the photocopied ones I see in my childhood art class, sealing the travel spell and making me seek out a man who is much younger in my memory.

Paa Joe seems pleased that we've heard of him in Namibia and he puffs out his seventy-one year old chest, bare and glistening in the stifling air.

He's further elated when I tell him that I've come to write a story about his art. Even more so at my tale of bribing an Uber driver to hurry me along the treacherous, potholed road from Osu to his studio. Dim, an hour away and kissing the edge of a bustling highway.

Inside, the Ga coffin tradition struggles to stay alive.

Littered with a store of fishy, coke bottle and customized 'Abebuu Adekai' (proverb boxes), Paa Joe's workshop is the site of a childhood fantasy and I gasp at the realization that I am actually there.

We travel to fulfil our fantasies.

On the neon streets of Nana Plaza, they're sold for a couple of hundred Baht.

Bangkok's red light district is a thing of legend and the "ladyboys" are every bit the sensual sirens luring sailors to the rocks. High heels, red lips, giggling charm.

At a glance, everything entices.

Sizzling street meat, go-go and pop-up bars, insistent, gorgeous ladies of the night, the colours, the abandon, the flashing fall down the rabbit hole but many of the middle-age white men holding up the bars seem forged in the same factory.

Nondescript, balding, often potbellied and single-minded men who've come to the kingdom to explore the carnal.

Thailand is a country ripe for wish fulfilment and I go to quiet my mind.

At my little sister's insistence, I clamber into a *songthaew* in Chiang Mai heading north to a forest monastery in Mae Hong Son where I live the same day over and over.

Morning meditation. Sitting meditation. Walking meditation. Chanting.

The monks, their robes tangerine in the twilight, seem to have been doing this since the beginning of time. Wise and monotonous Buddhist ancients walking through the forest, smiling serenely, warning against the dreaded "monkey mind".

We pause for meals, tea and chores but mostly we sit in silence and learn to quiet the cacophony. To breathe, relax, let go.

We travel to learn.

Simple things like where to eat the best Malaysian street food.

Profound lessons about how easily hate, stereotypes and complete nonsense can refuse a seat next to you on a bus or follow you lecherously down a street asking "Please, Miss, how much?" Or random trivia like the fact that Ricki Stevenson went to see Josephine Baker when she was just three years old.

She tells us as much as we nibble on a complimentary croissant, enjoying the aircon in Paris' quaint Café Lateral before we head down the street looking for Adinkra symbols.

Nobody comes to Paris to consider Ghanaian symbology but Ricki is the founder of Black Paris Tours and she shows us blackness wherever she finds it.

In the curve of the city's delicate wrought iron, the Egyptian obelisk erect in the centre of Place de la Concorde, the countless memorials to mixed race Alexandre Dumas and in Little Africa where a wealth of black people collide.

"We were here."

It's a phrase Ricki says more than once.

While the black Americans feel pride at Ricki's stories about Josephine Baker who left Jim Crow America to become the world's "first black superstar" as an entertainer in Paris, I say a little prayer for the souls of the Senegalese *tirailleurs*, men of our then colonial soil who Ricki tells us lived, fought and died in both world wars.

We travel to discover little known history.

“My sister! My sister! My African sister!”

The hawker calls to me as I make my way to a tour bus outside Vatican City and I turn around to find him dark, dreadlocked, hustling but beaming.

We don't exchange names but in the time it takes for the tour bus to threaten departure, we have both been refreshed.

The drink no less than the cool water of our shared continent, our laughter, a quick discussion about our current occupations peppered with small, innocent bits of our lives before the demonstration of a nifty collapsible bowl.

The Euro/Namibian Dollar exchange rate has caused my bank account to burst into protesting flame so I give him a token though I can't afford the bowl.

Myriad African migrants sell these and more.

They hand out fliers advertising open top bus tours and hawk trinkets from their home countries which are often waved away if not vehemently refused.

“If I wanted African souvenirs, I'd be in Africa!”

We travel to survive.

Many of the Africans I see in Rome have braved the hostility and the sea. They've come to be rejected, glared at, menaced and worse, but often the bleak triumph is escaping far more than is ever conveyed on the news.

We travel because we can.

In Indonesia, I see more groups of black travellers than I ever have anywhere else.

They pop into cafes in Ubud and walk languidly down the beach in Kuta. Privileged, stereotype-incinerating, beautiful, a sight for sore eyes.

Travelling alone through Bali for a month in 2017, I learn to be brave.

I learn to rest, reach out, make friends, change minds, appreciate difference and smile at the things we share.

Fussing mothers. A Thai woman spit wiping dirt off her daughters face as they sell grilled chicken skewers in Pai.

Expectant ancestors. Piles of ghost money smoldering on the streets of Penang to appease the dearly departed.

Painful history. Stone slaves frozen in New Orleans' Congo Square where once a week they were allowed to sing, dance and play music.

We travel for many reasons.

To eat, experience, find ourselves, marvel, make new friends, explore and escape but ultimately we travel to experience humanity.

Our own in the face of new norms, societies, cultures, sights, sounds, charms and challenges but also to test the weight of the world's.

Travel burrows deep and it changes us.

You go out. You live, you open up, become more tolerant, more curious and kind and suddenly everything you love about home becomes so much sweeter.

A piece of world class Namibian beef in the face of whatever it is they're trying to pass off in the states.

A blazing hot summer's day while Germans celebrate drizzling spring in shorts, eating ice cream, delighted below the grey.

Travel is a wellspring of gratitude even as it pushes us to strive for more.

I catch a flash of gold on a street in Berlin.

For a moment, I think someone has dropped something precious but there is writing on the immovable treasure.

"Mathilde Lilly Bielschowsky."

The plaque says she's been dead 76 years. One of the millions murdered during the Holocaust.

The Germans call the glistening squares *stolpersteine*⁴.

Golden "stumble stones" placed in front of the place where those who died in Nazi prisons, sterilization clinics, extermination or concentration camps lived or worked.

The idea is that every day, people unwittingly stumble upon history.

They read a name, remember their dead, vow it will never happen again.

In Windhoek, we tend to commemorate our history with metal statues but in Berlin I realise there can be far more art to remembrance. Thoughtful and creative memorials that employ artists and which can be intricately woven into the very fabric of our daily lives.

This is why we travel.

To expand our imagination and our minds.

To think bigger, better and with perspective.

To discover all the existential tools and tricks the world has to offer.

To let the world know that our often misrepresented patches of Earth exist, humbly, mostly happily, with much to offer and that everyone, yes, everyone is welcome.

Even a once little African girl who gawked at a Ghanaian fantasy coffin in an art class...

It's getting late in Paa Joe's workshop.

It's a long way back to Osu but I'm reluctant to leave my childhood dream so I dawdle a little, peering at the paint buckets in corners and catching snatches of the radio playing outside.

Paa Joe has never been to Namibia so I invite him.

He points up to the dusty ceiling to indicate North.

I point down to the studio floor to indicate South and we laugh at our vague geography before settling into a silence.

Him picking at his *fufu*, smiling slightly at a woman blown in from God knows where.

Me watching him and grinning back.

WHAT'S IN A WEEK

Some people think it's a bad omen.

The fish, dead, and floating along Lake Oanab's shore.

They think God is warning but it's just rain pouring, flooding Katima, delighting Windhoek as a little girl's body glides across Goreangab Dam.

The newspapers say she was gone three days before she was found. Five years old, alone and floating like the fish.

Her mother reported her missing after giving her to her father and that was the last time she'd see her little girl go. See her alive and well and not as never-again as the 19-year-old woman at Aroab.

The one who had a boyfriend who had a knife and used it to stab her once and again and again and again.

For the ten-year old girl in Ongwediva the count is two. Twice a 25-year-old man sexually assaulted her.

Twice he dragged her out of her childhood and into the nightmare that will last much longer than those fleeting, shuddering, minutes, haunting her waking hours, creeping through her nights, setting her apart.

The good news is that Namibia had a record year for tourism.

More people came to visit us than ever before. They came to see Swakopmund, they marveled at Sossusvlei, Epupa Falls and the Skeleton Coast and some may even have made it to the water.

The one that floats fish and the other that floats girls.

To get to the former they may have taken the Windhoek-Rehoboth road. They may have driven past the fateful spot where five died and many wept as drivers of a tractor, a Jetta and a Mercedes Benz clashed and crashed and killed.

I took a photograph of the dam once.

Of a little boat trailing a big blue car and I thought it quite a thing. A crowd had gathered to watch it go. To watch it take to the murky water, sending waves rippling across the surface concealing God knows what below.

I'm reading all this in a taxi to the mall.

I'm scrolling through the headlines on my phone, witnessing what's in a week and wondering what the world is coming to when I realize the man beside me is talking.

He wants my cap.

It's hanging off a loop on my gym bag. It's cool in its statement of 'Royal' and it's geometric black stitching and the taxi driver would like me to be the kind of Samaritan who gifts caps to men in moving cars. It's a few days before the request becomes sinister and I shake my head "no" with a laugh. It's good natured and friendly banter and I exit a few minutes later with faith in the world and in strangers.

Shapuline Shaduka wasn't as lucky.

A man wanted her cap, she fought back and she died in an attempt to protect what was hers.

She leaves behind a one-year-old girl and a degree as unfinished as her life. Dead in the arms of the father of her child, Shapuline joins a number growing with each passing day.

Women killed, abused, raped and assaulted in a country that needs to educate and discipline our boys and men with as much zeal as it reserves to beseech the Lord.

Shapuline's killer is 19 years old.

He's stunned and he's sorry and he's a product of society.

One in which perceived disrespect can end in murder. Where ten year olds and toddlers are fair game and the headlines grow more gruesome each day.

They say a woman has fled to the southern parts of the country.

She's in the wind carrying the 46 730 dollar she stole from her Chinese employer and a terrible part of me grins.

Not because she's taken what's not hers.

Not because stealing is good or admirable or right.

Only because I imagine her as bare feet hitting the sand, bloodied soles slapping the concrete doing what I wish so many Namibian women had but fatally failed to do...

Run.

INSIDE THE BASILICA

There are only a handful of places I can find God.

In the quiet, intricate miracle of nature. Sometimes, fleetingly, between the lines of soul-mirroring written word. Always, deep in the eyes of children reaching out from foreign, unfamiliar places to drown any creeping lonely of my solo travels in a sudden smile, a nose wiggle or a 'Hey, Chocolate!'

Never in churches.

At my all-girls Cape Town boarding school, we'd do our bit to save our souls every Sunday.

Dressed uncomfortably, compulsorily, in our school uniforms, we'd hurry towards the church whose denomination was closest to the strain of faith our parents had ticked on our application forms and sit shivering in the pews.

Butchering hymns, giggling through benedictions, wondering if there'd be cake.

But only if we didn't write the whole thing off altogether.

If we'd quiet the promise of certain hellfire and brimstone and take our chances with the neighbourhood busybodies hastily identifying us loitering around the shops by our school uniform before calling the headmistress to chastise her wayward heathens.

I never felt God there or in school assemblies. Those bi-weekly battles against brazen boredom that always began and ended with a prayer, a blessing or a hymn.

A few times, maybe, I felt God at choir. Singing Gustav Holst's 'I Vow to Thee My Country', 'May the Road Rise Up to Meet You' or as a child squeaking through 'Immanuel'.

I was about 14 years old when I returned home from boarding school to find *Maria praying in tongues.

She'd invited me over to her house next door much in the same way she'd done since we were five years old but this time we didn't make awful, too-sweet microwave cakes or guffaw through a game plan for pilfering our neighbour's guavas.

Neither were we alone.

About four girls stood in a circle in her bedroom. They looked me up and down as Maria took my hand and led me to join the circle where they started to pray coherently enough before their words began to run backwards.

Or sideways.

Twisting and turning into something that sounded guttural, bogus and possessed.

I didn't find God in Maria's prayer circles and I found less and less of Him after she died.

Never in churches.

Many years later, when Maria is dead, buried and I haven't had the courage to visit her grave, I'm standing at the edge of Rome looking out over the Vatican's Bridge of Angels and I know she would be happy I'm there.

She always hoped I would find God the way she did.

In cathedrals, prayer circles and tongues.

Once, the first time I visited her in hospital, she urged me to stop reading Harry Potter.

The witchcraft, the words and the wickedness would damn my soul and again – finally – she urged me to join her in the house of the Lord.

She went a little easier on me before the end.

Stopped inviting me to church, criticizing my reading list and simply relaxed into letting me talk about my serendipitous, unorthodox life without the finger-pointing, patronizing, hell-threatening judgement that often seems so integral to being a Christian.

I think of Maria in the Sistine Chapel as I peer up at Michelangelo's 'The Last Judgement'.

I'm deep within Vatican City, sardined into a room with a hundred other people, heads tilted toward the ceiling where some of the most famous paintings sprung from documentaries, art history classes and Dan Brown movies cover the entire altar wall.

Christ and his mother Mary, Saint Peter holding the keys to heaven, Charon with his boatload of the damned.

I don't realise I'm crying until I notice a drop of moisture on the back of my hand and I don't notice the world hasn't actually gone silent before I hear the chapel guards calling out in irritation.

"Silence! Silencio! Shhh! No pictures! No video!"

We stand there about 5 short minutes before we're pressed to move on.

Out of the chapel, into the light and towards St Peter's Basilica. A massive Italian Renaissance church built on a sprawling city of the dead including St Peter's tomb.

Inside, the papal altar brings me to my knees.

Directly under the dome of the Basilica, something seems to call from the church's heart of gold framed by a bronze, Baroque canopy so, entranced, I walk towards the pews at the very back where I pray, fervently, uncharacteristically, and on my knees.

There is no sound.

No breath.
No gibberish.
No harp.

But suddenly, there he is...

God.

Powerful, present, petering away even as I grasp to keep him but, for once, precisely where Maria said he would be.

ALL ABOARD THE SUNSET LIMITED

George likes to say ‘We’re the sculptors of our own destiny.’

I’ve known him one out of the two days I’ll be on a train from Los Angeles to New Orleans but when people repeat things five times in the space of as many minutes, you figure it’s their go-to fascinator.

That phrase which feels familiar on the tongue and easy enough in the air that they trot it out as often as they can, anticipating nods, knowing smiles and one more order of Finlandia vodka.

According to George, his destiny is the Sunset Limited. A 123-year-old inter-city train, chugging from California to Louisiana via Arizona, New Mexico and Texas.

The loquacious lounge car attendant has been mixing Screwdrivers, microwaving hot pockets and announcing his imminent breaks over a crackling loud speaker on the Sunset for 20 years and he’s come to know a few things about travelers.

How they’ll see two whole days of nothing but mountains, Mojave Desert and bayou country gaping soulfully on the horizon and strike up easy, cost-sharing friendships with an enthusiasm reserved especially for the impending and particular horror of prolonged confinement.

He takes my American friend James and I for the ilk and seems surprised to be entirely incorrect.

Jim and I have known each other five years, the two-day trip is his idea, the third or fourth one of his life and he’s been previewing the excursion with a goading, chuckling ‘Are you ready?’ for the last five days.

Practically, “ready” means arriving at Los Angeles’ Union Station at 21h30 on a warm Wednesday evening.

That’s an hour before departure on platform 13 where a uniformed Amtrak attendant checks our tickets and has us stow our bags on the train’s first floor before gesturing right and up the stairs to coach. Rows and rows of blue reclining seats, dark during a drowsy time of night.

Seats 57 and 58 are where Jim and I will spend the next 3 211 kilometres as the Sunset Limited clatters over 71 kilometres of track per hour for the next 48. We can move between our seats, the dining section, a sunny indoor observation deck and the lounge car where we meet George, Kurt and Ben.

That last one is smuggling tequila.

Not in the kind of quantities that will get him arrested. Just with a flagrant disregard for the Sunset's no outside alcohol policy as he regularly ducks into the lounge car bathroom with a telltale bottle of orange Minute Maid magically topping up with every bowel movement.

Ben has heard that he looks a little like Adrian Grenier before and commutes between Tucson, Arizona and Los Angeles where he sets up high school networks but not to the extent that he can afford to live in the City of Angels fulltime.

Instead he takes the train home to Tucson where we say goodbye to him after a chatty night spent staring out into the pitch black in-between discussion's about Fermi's Paradox, 'American Gods' and Gila Monsters. The latter venomous Arizona-dwelling lizards Ben Google Images on his phone and says need to be half drowned along with your hand if you're ever blighted enough to have one figure you for a fool.

Kurt calls Arizona "the wild west" and, submerged Gila Monsters firmly in mind, James and I believe him.

We meet Kurt over sundowners on our first full day on the Sunset after we've said goodbye to Ben and bolted through sleepy 7am Tucson making a beeline for coffee at Caffe Luce before hotfooting it back to the train.

You can leave during the Sunset's sporadic stops but if you linger too long at a quirky coffee shop or underestimate how long it will take you to stumble back on board from a train station adjacent bar, that's every bit your own business.

The train won't wait.

Horns will blare insouciantly at railway crossings and your luggage will just keep on hurtling through the Sonoran Desert. Right past the prickly saguaro cacti you've probably seen on loop behind Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote.

Back to Kurt in the lounge car and he's telling us about President Trump. That he voted for him, that he was the lesser of two evils and how Kurt carries a gun as naturally and as often as putting on pants in the morning.

It's a day after Trump renames Namibia, dropping an 'i' and breaking the internet and Kurt is thrilled that I have come to visit America from so far. He doesn't attempt to say the name of my country back to me but his eyes widen at the words "Southern Africa" and, when he leaves, he tells me to enjoy my stay in "the land of the partially free".

Kurt didn't vote for Obama.

He's 61 years old and he says his wife, whose existence he sums up in a smiling "she was cool," continues to communicate with him despite a recent and significant loss in corporeality.

Kurt has never been on a train before but he loves the Sunset.

He's thinking of bringing his motorcycle on it next time. Stowing it somewhere as he enjoys the slow pace of the train. Glancing into passing gardens, returning waves from cheerful locals and watching the light and landscape graduate in surges of mountain, desert, pecan groves, farmland and marshy bayou.

Kurt's motorbike is one of three things he owns in the world alongside two jeeps, one much like the Comanche he's wearing printed on a greying shirt below a thick white head of hair and a pair of piercing blue eyes.

He had a house once in Arizona.

He bought it for U\$40 000 and hates how people from places like Los Angeles bought up property in the southwestern state only to sell or rent it for more than locals can afford.

Kurt lost his house but he doesn't say how.

Instead he sips slowly from the large bottle of beer he's nursing between two slabs of hand and talks about trail runs. Much loved jeep excursions he takes alone or with friends, bettering his skill to navigate Arizona's harsh desert terrain and shooting targets if at anything at all.

Kurt's preferred pastime isn't much but it's his favourite kind of freedom.

Going out and not having anyone chase him off their property and feeling, sometimes, that he's the only man in the world. Unchecked by law, order or any president's perceptions.

He tells us again that he voted for Trump as the lesser of two evils because he's been witnessing Hillary Clinton's crimes since he was kid. Then he glances at me, maybe at the colour of my skin, and adds that he didn't vote for Obama but only because he didn't think he had enough experience.

James – perennial thorn in illogical sides – points out that Obama had far more experience than Trump and Kurt bristles before countering that America doesn't need another politician and that he doesn't much care who the president is as long as his family eats and they can protect themselves.

Overall Kurt thinks America "needs a reset" and, to him, Trump's flirtation with nuclear war may be the very thing to wash the USA and the world clean.

"We need to start again. Everything. All over."

I last see Apocalyptic Kurt at the train station in Alpine, Texas, his grey shirt glowing a little in the light of a pale toenail clipping moon and he waves as James and I head out to see thirty minutes of the city.

In Alpine, there's an art gallery called CatchLight, store fronts shut tight for the night and The Saddle Club a brisk walk away where two women smile as we hurry in and down a shot of tequila and one of Jack before scurrying back to the train past two huge GMC trucks barreling down the road and a Thai food kiosk whose owner waves us away with a smile signaling "closed".

I'd wanted to ask Kurt what he thinks of the border wall at our stop in El Paso but I didn't see him.

Instead, a while before Alpine, I take in the fence between the Mexican city of Juarez and the American city of El Paso and marvel at how arbitrary borders are.

From the El Paso platform I can watch an entire swathe of Mexico.

See a bustling motorway with cars whizzing by, graffiti that reads "Reconditos," houses painted in colourful geometric designs and a mountain adorned with white lettering. A biblical Hollywood sign painted haphazardly in Spanish.

"La Biblia es la verdad. Leela."

"The Bible is the truth. Read it."

The two New Mexican women James introduces me to in the Sightseer car on the final day of our journey don't mention Juarez but they're glad I include Mexican people when talking about American minorities.

Black Lives Matter has born witness about rampant racial profiling and discrimination by law enforcement, #TakeTheKnee is just beginning to gain traction, DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) is highlighting the plight of Mexican immigrants to America born on either side of the kind of wall you can see at El Paso and they're heartened that their stories are trickling through the world.

The New Mexicans are retired teachers from Roswell and they grin when I shriek with excitement and begin to chatter about aliens. One of them shows us a photo of her granddaughter at an annual UFO Festival.

The event is meant to attract more tourists to the waning city, capitalizing on theories about Area 51, the 90s series named after the town's popularity and science fiction in general.

Actors from Star Trek were in attendance one year and the teachers say it's becoming a pretty big deal before asking me if I'm surprised they're not alien as they gleefully pretend to pat down their antennae.

I'm not surprised but I think we all feel a little alien passing through Houston.

Taking in the piles of rubble left in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. Small mangled islands in empty streets that seem the sight of some kind of abduction.

Houston is our last stop before Louisiana.

It ends a long trip through the expanse of interminable Texas and, in Lafayette, a little black girl in a red checkered dress waves as houses begin to look a little bit more dilapidated, forgotten, twisted by the natural disaster of mistreatment almost 400 hundred years old.

Somewhere above the Mississippi River, high on the Huey P. Long Bridge, we catch sight of New Orleans.

It's been two nights and two days of counting power lines and Union Pacific Trains, taking photographs, sleeping fitfully, talking to strangers, drinking cranberry vodkas and watching Dollar

General stores flash by on the fringes of cities and towns far less famous than where we're headed and we're happy to see it shine.

We rattle into New Orleans just after 22h00 and our exhausted bodies and singular experience render us something a little less than human.

Intercity aliens, a little green from two days of train, smoothing down our hair, patting down our antennae...

About to invade The Big Easy.

ABOUT THE CURRY

I'm becoming really concerned about the curry.

It's hot, yellow and deliciously sticky and my mother has made it exactly the same way for thirty years with a secret of spices, a trickle of turmeric and with the amazing ability to not have the chicken skin cling to the bottom of the pot.

When I'm solitary and starving to death in my apartment, I can smell it if I wrinkle my nose right.

If I tilt my head and shut my eyes, I can imagine the ineffable aroma wafting down the hall of all the houses we have ever called home and it's enough to set my crazed culinary instincts down a pathetic path of rubbery chicken, burnt skillet and some guilty gulping down throat.

I'm going to write down the recipe one day.

Before the world abruptly empties and my mother moves on and I'm left wanting what I can never truly have again.

I'm going to watch her one day.

Minutely observe every pinch of salt and block of stock thrown into a cauldron filled with the magic of motherhood, the melancholy of memory, the taste of time and the warmth of love.

But this only in-between afternoons when I ask her about the start. When I carefully place her stories in a jar marked 'Before'.

Before me, before my brothers and sisters and the existence extinguishing time before my father.

A time when she was the girl one could easily mistake for me in photographs and who went on to train in the army before becoming the kind of graphic artist whose work can still be seen on faded billboards in a birth country I have never quite called home.

The same can be said of my father.

Of future enlightening afternoons in which I'll ask him about the grandmother that I am named for but never knew and the granddad who's long and gone life remains only as a fading image of slight man astride a small dwelling in the countryside delighted by the fact that we brought him a battery charged light.

I'll ask him also to expound on his tall tales fit for fantasy novels. Of being one soul in many bodies including a red headed fellow in America and of the space ship he saw in a field as a child. Set in the sky behind aliens as big as oaks.

All these many questions, these histories and stories to write down before it's too late. Before life comes dressed darkly as death on the day one finally decides to ask those who gave us life about their lives, the books they've read, the choices they made, those that were made for them, their motivations and their regrets.

Talohole Enkono has already begun.

She mails me five days after Valentine's day and asks me if she can pay me to write her mother's memoir because she doesn't think she's much of a writer.

She wants the world to know that her mother lived. That she survived the massacre at Cassinga, attended a village school deep in the heart of the Omusati region and went on to become a medical doctor as she reared her children as a single mum before beginning to build a hospital in Outapi while raising Talohole's son as she studies in the Ukraine.

Her story is touching but I tell her no.

I have a knot of hopes and dreams and commitments I need to see through and I tell her she should try writing it herself. It can be edited later or ghost written if she wants it for the world but, in the meantime, she should gather her mother's stories as best she can so she can tell her children and they can tell theirs and theirs.

Before everything that tore African traditions asunder, this is the way it was done.

Legends leapt up out of village fires and family histories were recalled with pride even if we didn't have the shadows of Shakespeare and Achebe to call attention to our inarticulateness.

Talohole doesn't reply but a few months later she's back in my inbox, beaming, buoyant and bubbling with delight.

"I took your advice on writing my mom's biography, it's challenging looking for words to describe and explain. Nothing's impossible, though."

As I write, Talohole Enkono sits at her desk in the Ukraine writing about her mother in-between her studies.

She hopes to tell the world an inspiring Namibian story. She hopes to regale Africans with the tale of a single, Namibian doctor who defies odds and nurtures ambition. It's uplifting, inspiring and ripe for emulation but it's the kind of story we don't often see on western television and rarely read about in widely published books because the west's storytelling mould is not made for or interested in Africa's shine.

Africa with its ancestors still whispering in the ears of elders. Africa interrupted by colonialism and just beginning to emerge from blood-soaked soil in shining shards. Africa filled with family, fantasy and factual stories told by the people who lived them.

Or by the children who listened.

Even though the stories halted and stuck in their parents' throats.

Even when they rambled and ran back in time.

Even as the pot smoked and the chicken burnt because they forgot about the curry.

AFRICANA

There's a black woman standing in our living room.

My mother is walking through her like she isn't there at all but she shudders a little every time she does so I know the woman is there in one way or another.

She came to me from the fire.

I bought a book of matches from the Yesteryear shop in Solar, lit one to see what life was like before energy wands and the moment it burnt out, trailing a thin grey cloud of smoke, she was there.

Standing. Smiling. Black as the night.

I've only seen that kind of skin on story discs.

In the fairytale ones your mother projects onto the ceiling at night. The kind everyone seems to like so much as kids about the midnight people from Africa who would talk to animals, dance around big leaping fires and who disappeared without trace.

Some legends say they went to space and there's a pretty epic series about that on Netflix. Others say the land they lived on swallowed them whole because the greed of their chiefs began to anger the ancestors. But they're just kids' stories made into movies. Like 'The Chronicles of Narnia' or 'Harry Potter'.

They're just fairytales about mythical creatures and so this woman shouldn't be standing in my living room.

Smiling.

She looks like the Africanas... and also a lot like my mom.

Watching my mother pace across the room, through the woman, shuddering, it's as though she's walking through herself. The same eyes. Deep and dark. The same cheekbones. High and proud.

Different hair.

My mother's long and silky. Hers a knot of tremendous tight curls that know nothing about gravity.

Beyond their hair, the only real difference is their skin.

My mother's is like mine and everyone else's in the world. A smooth, single tone of alabaster and the woman's looks as though she's made of the sky. Cut from the cloth God drapes over the world at night. And she's just as prone to shining. Mostly about the eyes. Which twinkle. Eerily. Knowingly. Quiet.

"Are you listening to me, Stara? My world, this is the kind of thing that lands people in a lunar!"

I haven't been.

I have no idea what my mother has been rambling on about and when I finally tear my eyes from the smiling black woman, I realise that my mother has tears in her eyes, her hands are shaking and she's pointing to a spot behind me, somewhere near the stairs...

"So just tell me you see him! Just tell me you can see him there, Stara, for Saturn's sake..."

There's nobody there.

Not for me.

But just as real as the woman, my mother says there is a black man standing on the stairs and he looks like the Africanas on the story discs.

He came to my mother by water. A silver drop in the sink.

She says he looks like the father I have never met and who is due back from Sirius B in 12 days.

And that's when the world goes black. And so do we.

We wake up a few hours later.

A heap of ourselves where once we were standing and both the man and the woman are gone but they have left us their skin.

For some reason, we aren't afraid.

Waking up, staring at each other now both a brilliant shade of brown, we feel oddly calm. As if we have woken up from a deep beauty sleep that has revealed our true selves which look better than we ever have.

Strangely, we feel as though this is how we were always supposed to look and so it doesn't scare us.

But it should.

If we could just remember. If we could just focus on the slight pity behind all the black man and the black woman's smiling, maybe it would.

They start rounding us up at nightfall.

My mother and I aren't the only ones who have changed. Hundreds of families from all over the world have turned black, seen visions and seen shades of the Africanas who look a lot like themselves.

And some say we have become them.

The dark, dancing, disappeared people.

They collect my mother and I at around 21h00 a few hours later as we cower in front of the news.

They are scared. They want us gone. And they are coming.

In oxygen masks, in riot gear, to prod us into the back of big white vans with big black batons that sear my new skin.

They move us all into some buildings at the edge of the city. A failed residential area built above some old sewage pipes where the windows gape, the walls crumble and wild dogs roam the streets at night.

We aren't allowed to go back.

There will be processing.

There will be tests... and there will be special identification cards once we are deemed non-threatening.

The woman appears again as I'm about to fall asleep with skin as dark as the sky framed in the broken window.

She places a cool, black hand on my fevered brow and says 12 words that send a lifetime of memories coursing through my brain in no more than a whisper.

"History forgotten is history relived.

Take heart.

You have been here before..."

THREE BOYS/MAD HOPES

There's a little boy's body lying at the morgue.

Unnamed. Unclaimed. Shirt blue, pants grey, passport photo in pocket.

He'll never again run like the one outside Grove Mall. Never spot me from across the street, trail me almost to KFC saying "Water. Water, Miss. Please. Water."

I only notice the bottle of water in the outside compartment of my backpack when I'm driving away in a cab.

It's full almost to the brim and clearly visible to anyone behind me and I finally understand the young man's insistence despite my shooing him away. Stride swift, phone clutched, wallet empty besides the N\$20 that will get me home.

My heart sinks to my feet as I catch what may be my last glimpse of him in the rearview mirror. His too big shirt billows in a merciful breeze as he bends over a dry hosepipe in the ground and his cheeks hollow with the effort of trying to suck something out of the opening.

The gush of water is timed.

Perhaps after sunset the stream will flow freely but for now the pipe is simply a tease. The kind of cruel joke that sees him wandering the streets in the first place. Filthy, alone and about 11 years old.

The water tastes sour when I drink it later but I drink every guilt-laced drop.

How can I not when my childhood was filled with makeshift dishwashing liquid and black bag slippery slides? Innocent ecstasy made magic with water to waste spilt copiously from taps that always gushed and nourished with the slightest turn.

I wonder about the boy's mother but only for a moment.

One seldom knows how another life goes so I perish the thought to pray he met someone better than me.

Someone who listened. Someone less damaged by their duels with crime, harassment and strange men who stopped and heard and looked in their backpack.

It's a mad hope but I send it out anyway, watch it fly out the window and over the city to the place where mad hopes go.

A few days later a 16-year-old boy dies a hero.

He rushes to the aid of woman screaming for help after being robbed of her cellphone and his life ends abruptly in the street - blood pooling, knife wound gushing, mother approaching to encounter the unspeakable.

His name was Megameno Kamwangha and he would have turned 17 this week.

Four years younger than his killer, perhaps 6 years older than the boy looking for water and no one can say how much more than the one in the mortuary.

They both wore blue.

In the images the world would come to know them by on social media and in press, the unnamed and the heroic both wore water.

Megameno's bright, Nike and below a smiling face. The little boy's removed from his body, laid below a light jacket next to the photograph the police found in his pocket.

I'm not sure why I notice this and I don't know why it calms me.

I suppose it's another one of my mad hopes.

Those irrational pleas you send out into the ether when you think there's a God, an afterlife and that people who like the same colour shirts may notice one another in some heavenly queue, walk over to each other at the pearly gates and share the story of their lives.

Perhaps talking to Megameno, the little boy would finally have a name.

He'd claim the family that hasn't yet claimed him.

He'd tell the story of his demise and his eyes would shine bright and alive as he described what he'd have liked to do with his life if living was kind, fair or worth the trouble.

I know it's a sweet story and a mad hope but I send it out anyway. Watch it fly out the window and over the city to the place where mad hopes go thinking:

Maybe mad hopes eventually get to watching gods and make them cry.

Big tears disguised as welcome rain that soothes "Water. Water. Miss, please, water."

THE KUDU TOMORROW

My friend *Trina isn't beyond wearing sunglasses at night. She's the kind of woman who can throw on a burlap bag, cinch it at the waist, top it with a wig cap and we'll all call it high fashion.

Trina doesn't walk, she glides.

While most women in heels smack of wobbling baby deer, Trina honours the ground in her sashay. For her, it clears of cracks, of gum and of those little stones you sometimes get in your shoes.

For Trina, the floor stays firm, makes music of the click of her sky-high stilettos and muffles the sound of the blows.

The fists and kicks that land on her tiny body on a street in Katutura where she is simply walking, simply being, simply screaming on the inside.

The inner yells are nothing new and one of the many things Trina has to hide away. Sometimes deep inside, other times with the big, black glasses she wears in the corner of Primi Piatti huddled over something edge-blurring.

Her make-up skills are equal to the bruises below the glasses but the truth is she hasn't the energy. Concealment is her entire life and today, for just a moment, she will not bother. At least not beyond wearing dark glasses in buildings.

Clearly battered, certainly bruised.

After this, Trina's glasses are a little more unsettling.

They're a fashion statement, yes and for the sun but they are also a disguise. Though which of the three I can never quite tell before she whips them off with panache, smiles like the rising sun and says "Marth! Girl! Hey, Mami!"

The glasses don't come off at Free Your Mind comedy's Ladies' Show.

Windhoek's tickle-seekers spill out of the Warehouse Theatre, past the transgender woman painted subversively on the wall and past Trina who asks if we can talk.

My eyes start to water before she can tell me her story because she has sunglasses on at night. From the way she shifts her feet, tonight not in heels, I know she's not going to take them off.

The police got her outside KFC.

They picked her up for no reason she can fathom and tried to beat the boy back into her with clenched fists, weaponized words and the big brick of ignorance so many people seem to keep in their back pocket.

Trina just wants me to know.

She doesn't want me to raise hell, frog march her to the nearest police station or burst into the pathetic tears that run down my cheeks as I stand in the oblivious crowd. She just wants me to bear witness.

To let me know that this happens here.

That gay, lesbian, bisexual, intersex, transgender and queer people are not safe or protected in the land of the bravely upholding colonial laws long after the people who imposed them have abolished them.

My friend *Georgina tells me the same thing.

Not about the police but about being unsafe.

Georgina is transgender too and her daily dose of violence arrives like clockwork at Wernhil taxi rank.

Face done, walk feminine and clearly a woman housed in a male body, she takes a breath before she opens the taxi door and steps out.

Georgina makes it a few metres before anybody notices and the first slur is like a clarion call to the rest.

"Moffie!"

The word gains ground and follows her all the way to Pick 'n Pay before the mass of vicious strangers recede towards their cars and their own lives. A faceless throng of people who don't know her, who have no business following her, who have further inspired her to go to the kudu.

Trina will be there too.

At 09h00 o'clock tomorrow morning, Trina, Georgina and some of the city's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex and queer (LGBTQI+) community and their friends will meet at the kudu on the corner of Independence Avenue and John Meinert Street after a week of #WeAreOne LGBTQI+ advocacy, because they are stronger than the slurs, the beatings and the things we pretend don't exist.

They are stronger than the human rights violations we turn a blind eye to and the political, religious, traditional and community leaders who demonize and stoke discrimination against them.

Colourful, peaceful and proud, they will be there. And I hope you will too.

As an ally.
As a friend.
As a fellow human being.

MISTER PLUG

They call Los Angeles the City of Dreams but they never specify whether they're shattered or shining.

It's a city that sparkles with images you'll recognize from movie scenes and that definitive larger than life white sign then bewilders as you saunter into a Starbucks one early morning looking for a plug.

A middle aged white man at a large shared table is directing everyone to them as if it's his day job.

He sips on a big plastic cup of water and punctuates each rush of air from an opening door with:

"Need a plug? There's a plug. Hey brother, do you need a plug?"

The man - brown-haired, balding, neat blue shirt - looks like somebody's dentist but he has all the plugs mapped out. A cluster of white squares in the left corner. A few more on the right somewhat hidden behind the table to which he directs a black academic type.

I wonder how Mister Plug knows who has sauntered into the LA heat in search of electricity.

He asks some people, ignores others and seems to look through various people completely.

I need a plug too but I'm one of the invisibles.

I sit across the table from him after ordering a cappuccino and a chorizo and cheese sandwich and I might as well not exist.

I'm not sure if he hears my deep sigh when I turn away from the two people using the plug I was hoping to use that day but as I drum my fingers on my laptop patiently waiting for somebody to leave, he gifts the last one to the black academic.

A hidden treasure for members of a Voltage Club I'm clearly not a part of.

When a young man skateboards by, past the sparkling glass and enters the busy Starbucks only to be immediately directed to one more of the hard-to-see plugs in the middle of the room and practically hidden behind a table leg, I clear my throat pointedly.

Mister Plug doesn't see me but it's clear that he's heard me when I notice his prominent Adam's apple bobbing nervously as he begins to clean up a small splash of water he's spilled on the table top.

I look at him but he continues reading his newspaper.

Everyone whose plug access he's enthusiastically brokered is all set and I sit there waiting for one of them to leave.

At some point during my light and friendly finger drumming, I realize that nobody in the Starbucks is charging a laptop.

I've come to work and for a second that seems infinitely more important than the people I see using the plugs.

Every last one of them is charging a phone. Checking messages, scrolling, using the Wi-Fi.

An old black man who sat in the exact same spot the day before.

A blonde woman seated opposite him drinking water.

The skateboarder not drinking coffee or water just plugged in and checking his texts.

The black academic reading a book, refueling his Samsung and sipping glacially on a coffee.

I'm missing something and it takes a while for it to come together.

Cast in the light of walking along Santa Monica Boulevard in West LA and encountering more indigent people than I have ever seen within a similar radius anywhere I've ever been, I link the Voltage Club with the outside world where they're often doing something else.

Mumbling, beseeching, loitering, pushing trolleys filled with the day's collection of soft drinks cans and grimy glass bottles or simply talking to thin air.

Average looking, relatively clean but homeless.

Scorched by life in the City of Dreams that never specifies whether those dreams are shattered or shining, the people plugged in at Starbucks come in various incarnations. Failed or aspiring actors, actresses, musicians, poets, performers, drug addicts, people who've fallen on hard times or those who've merely sworn off a certain kind of life.

Mister Plug leaves and confirms my suspicions.

Behind him and out of sight is the backpack I've come to know so well.

That dilapidated carry-all into which whole lives and what's left of dreams are stuffed as the homeless walk around aimlessly each day.

Mister Plug sees me but he sees other people more clearly.

Those talking to concerned friends or relatives, scanning online employment ads and coming in from the elements to charge their phone.

The Starbucks baristas don't seem to mind and even if they did, the homeless would have Mister Plug.

Directing them, noticing them, making those often invisible visible.

CHILDREN AT MIDNIGHT

I meet Max at a bar called Loco Elvis. A Thai guy in blue John Lennon sunglasses is singing 'Last Nite' like he's Julian Casablancas and Max walks in, heads right for me, smiles and says "Yo, Chocolate!" like he heard it from my mother.

Then he challenges me to a wrestling match. He slams his elbow down on the table and says if he wins I have to give him a 100 Baht and if he loses I have to buy two of the malik garlands he's selling at 20 Baht each which brings the cost of the whole thing down to a real rip-off.

Max is ten years old.

It's about 11pm in Chiang Mai and he and his buddy Burn are selling roses and Arabian Jasmine to the patrons slowly slipping off their bar stools.

Though I know it's none of my business, I look around for some kind of Fagan.

A shady Dickensian character hovering around to make sure the kids don't try any funny flower business but I don't see anyone who looks like they're a pimp for a gang of children selling potpourri.

Still, Max and Burn are alone in bar at night. Max has a lazy eye that must be a real boon in the pity trade and both their young brown eyes look a little shinier than I find normal but no one bats an eyelid so I play along.

I ask them a few questions about where they're selling that night and get my arm wrestled to the ground before buying them each a piece of chocolate cake which they fling into their mouths as they run out into the street. High on sugar, the night and who knows what else.

A few minutes later I meet their friend Pozo who has just missed them. I ask him if he's friends with Burn and Max and he nods, places his flowers on the counter and sits down next to me at the bar when I tell him they've just left.

The football's on.

Germany is playing Portugal and Pozo says he hopes they win before sizing me up out of the corner of his eye and deciding that I look like the kind of sucker who will buy a whole bunch of roses and garlands.

Even though I already have two strands on my neck, ten strands hanging in my bathroom and two roses in a glass on the bar top.

Pozo is right. I cough up for three malik garlands and drape them over my growing flower arrangement on the counter and he grins at me and runs his hands over his buzzcut before watching the game for about fifteen minutes.

While he does, I smell the flowers. The Arabian jasmine smells like lily of the valley and the roses don't smell like anything at all. They're bright, beautiful and everything a rose should be but I get the feeling they'd be a big disappointment to Shakespeare.

The next night, I meet a musician who knows Max well and tells me he's going to be the greatest little con artist the world has ever seen. He says he's run into the kid by day and that his mum is a fit looking Thai woman with a boyfriend and that Max lives in the area with his grandmother.

He says it matter-of-factly and answers my questions about their safety and it being a school night, with a look that implies: "Honey, your life has been a cakewalk and a bag of chips, hasn't it?" and in words he says: "It's safe, it's school holidays and they need the money."

I can't argue with that and neither can I drink 100 baht cocktails and not spend 20 baht on their flowers so I buy some every night I see them amidst cheers of "Hey, chocolate. Thanks, chocolate. Chocolate, can you buy me some chocolate?"

The three of them are the cutest things you'll ever see. They are males with flowers and they are impossible to resist and I'm romanticizing the whole thing to a friend at a superbar called Zoe in Yellow after Pozo has spotted me and I've given him twenty Baht for a garland.

"You know he's drunk as fuck, right?"

I don't associate the sentence with the little kid who has just walked off so I look around at the many drunks I can choose from in Sodom and Gomorrah and ask who?

"Your little friend."

"Pozo?"

"Yeah, they use that money to buy rum and drink it at the back of the bars and sometimes they even get paid in it."

I stare after Pozo and, as if feeling my eyes on his back, he turns around, walks back to me and asks me to buy him a hamburger. I take in the glassiness of his eyes and ask him how much it is and he says 55 baht.

I'm starting to doubt him but I think it best he sobers up so I give him the money to go to the street food sellers outside the club and tell him he has to come and show me the burger. He nods.

About 30 minutes later, I'm giving up on him and trying not to look at my friend's smug face when a burger gets shoved in my face and is made to do a little burger dance that says: "I told you so."

It's Pozo.

He has ketchup in the corners of his mouth and he grins at me, says 'Thank you' and runs off into the night.

I head home.

I open the door to my little apartment and I pause in the doorway because I smell something. Something strong and sweet and familiar.

It's the Arabian Jasmine in my bathroom. Its scent seems strengthened by the night and it's like a presence in the dark room.

A presence that says "thank you."

And smells like children at midnight.

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