How you touched me,
you will never know

Michael M’tisunge Phoya
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Short-shorts and short stories

M’tisunge Michael Phoya

M.M. Phoya asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this collection.
Dedication

For two special women:

Joyce Glory Mpulula.

Mother,
father,
best friend,
goddess.
My gratitude, love, and respect, always.

and

Clara Helen Mpulula (my late grand mother)

‘Your deep affection
Made my infant years priceless.
In your beautiful eyes
I first saw the big yellow sun
Rising mightily over the scattered cotton fields.

My birth.’
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Part 1:

‘Cock-a-doodle-doo’

I’m still asleep but somewhere in my head the sound registers to be the crowing of a cock. Time to wake up. I open my heavy eyes, blink and try to focus. Nothing. I close them and wait. Seconds later I open them again. I see dull colours. It’s dawn.

I yawn and stare directly above. My eyesight lands on the wall where there’s a big crack. Some crack! I shift my view to the left and it lands on a calendar that is four years late. I can’t take it off because it will catch up again. Besides, it was placed up there using that type of glue that really sticks. Removing it might bring another mess on my already messy wall.

Beside the calendar are two lizards lazily chattering their tails. ‘Wretched creatures! I wonder if they know how hard it is to keep a roof over your head. Or is it their heads?’ I’m not sure.

Daylight is filtering through the many holes in my roof. When it passes through the cobwebs hanging up there the way a ceiling should, it creates a beautiful view. If you look at it for a moment without blinking, you get ‘hypnotized’ and your brain enters a state where you feel like you’re the smartest thing to grace the face of mother earth. I suppose it’s what my great-great grand fathers felt when they composed all those proverbs. Right now I’m under that influence and there’s a one or two I can add to their collection. Like ‘never wish on dreams if you’re poor for they never come true’. Ha! Ha! It’s 5 am and already I’m philosophical. I hate Mondays.

“Your bath is ready,” I hear the voice of my wife from outside the house. And so do the neighbours. I ignore it.

Still under the influence, I’m forced into retrospection. I’m seeing my whole evolution from the very pauper to the not-so-very-pauper. I’m also seeing all the missed opportunities and the goodies life could have offered me but didn’t. Thinking of the things I lack makes me feel like a loser, which is exactly what I am. I’m thinking of going into my dream world and be a hero of some sort. It’s not so hard since dreams are one of the few good things in life that are free.

As soon as I close my eyes, the hypnotic feeling vanishes. I’m left wishing, for the umpteenth time in my fifty-two years on earth, I’d never been born. My conscience is reminding that at least I have a life. I’m about to ask ‘What life?’ when the voice of my wife is heard again:
“Hurry up! The water is getting cold.”

I toss the five-year-old blanket off my aged body, stretch myself, and step into my half inch slippers. I bend over and search for, without looking, my toothbrush which is under my bed. After some random arm movements, I grab it and secure it between my teeth.

I reach for a blue towel with a length five times my waist. My know-all-neighbour once remarked that it’s the kind they use at the beach. Who cares? The words ‘Have a nice day’ together with a sketch of a round yellow head with two black dots for eyes and a curved line for a mouth are printed on it. I’ve had the towel for six months and I can swear on my mother’s grave I haven’t had a good day since. Maybe their version of a good day and mine are different.

I look in the mirror and I don’t like what I see: bloodshot cow eyes, a big flat nose, yellowish-brown uneven teeth, dark red lips, and a heavily wrinkled skin like a rhino’s. It’s pure ugliness in living colour. Mirrors do not lie and I hate them for that. For someone going through a living death, a lie is not so bad every now and then.

I push aside the dirty brown-once-red curtain that acts as a door to our bedroom and step into my living room-cum-dining room-cum-everything a decent house ought to have minus the bathroom. Four steps later I’m out of the main door onto the veranda-cum-kitchen. Four more steps could land me into foreign territory; my neighbours. We’re a very close-knit community.

I know you’ve noticed that my life is full of ‘cums’. I feel like a ‘me-cum-something’ myself. If only I could figure out the ‘something’ part. Now, let me acquaint you with my neighbourhood. My house, like a thousand others, is a mud-cum-cement brick house with two rooms. It has a roof made from different shades of iron sheets. I like to call it tailor-made. Fancy that! Maybe you’re thinking I’m equipped with a powerful vocabulary. The truth is I’m neither smart nor educated. ‘Tailor-made’ is a word I overheard my boss describe his suit to one of his girlfriends. Thanks to my neighbour’s daughter who goes to school, it took me only three weeks to find out the meaning.

If you are a non-intellect like me, the word means ‘something made to suit one’s needs’. Our landlord figured a roof was needed not iron sheets that matched.

The Muezzin from the neighbourhood mosque is the first thing that slaps me in the face when I step outside. Yes! That early and I know you feel my pain.

Our roofless bathroom, shared by seven households (someone’s idea of a community), is located thirty meters from my house. It was built on a steeped
place so from where I’m standing, I can clearly admire its view. The view to
our roofless toilet, on the other hand, cannot be admired. The toilet was built
right next to the houses - three houses away from mine, to be precise. On
windy days, the stench can really choke you up. Luckily enough, we have few
of those due to a lack of vegetation. Any fool can figure out that the toilet
should have been built where the bathroom is and vice versa. Fortunately, our
landlord is no fool and unfortunately, he is not sharp in the figuring
department. We all know that - except we don’t talk about it. Not in his face
anyway. It’s not that easy to find a house round here.

I’m standing on my veranda, a bucket of water in my hands, admiring the
weather. I start for the bathroom before the water gets real cold. Ten yards
later, someone overtakes me. How late can you get? It’s only five-fifteen!

“Hey!” I shout.

He turns round and I see it’s Yakobe who lives two houses away from mine. I
want to wise mouth him, which I easily do most of the times, but the look on
his face makes me think twice. Usually a benevolent character, Yakobe has
malice written all over his face. Something has happened to him.

Meanwhile, a brat is watching this whole feat and is finding it amusing. I give
him my hostile ‘Don’t mess with me’ look but he doesn’t buy it. No wonder I
can’t stand kids. I’m trying to think fast because I don’t want to look silly.

Silly enough, I head for the toilet which is the same direction as the bathroom.
With the bucket in my hands, the towel on my shoulder, a slice of soap in the
pocket of my shorts, and a toothbrush secured between my teeth, I reach the
toilet. I put the bucket down and steal a quick glance over my shoulder. The
kid is now smiling.

I remove the toothbrush, push aside the sack standing in place of a door, peek
in and try to spit when, suddenly, I notice someone is already in there.

“You son of a whore,” he says. “You worthless…”

Before he finishes his sentence, I release the sack and reach down for the
bucket. I head for my house as fast as my feet can carry me while leaving
behind a trail of blasphemous words.

The kid is now grinning ear to ear like he’s in a toothpaste advert. ‘Look, no
cavities!’ Speaking of toothpaste, I ignore the kid and head for the tap which,
oddly but luckily enough, is near my house. I brush my strong African teeth
using my toothpasteless toothbrush and wash my face and hair. The kid is now
laughing like a clown. I’m tired of this drama. I give him my hostile ‘I’m sick
and tired of you messing with me’ look and finally he buys it. His face turns
into one of those innocent expressions kids give their mothers when they expect a beating. I run a towel through my hair, bend down and lift the bucket. Without a backward glance, I head for my house.

“I see someone has beaten you to it,” says my wife who is at the veranda, preparing breakfast.

“I see we are in the mood for chit-chat this morning,” I counter attack and she shuts up.

“Anyway, it was poor Yakobe. I could have said something nasty but the look on his face... I think he has killed a man.”

“Nice try,” says my wife. “He almost killed one yesterday.”

“He what? Who?”

“His father-in-law,” says my wife.

“His good mannered father-in-law? The one who is always reading the Holy Bible?” In my life I’ve met some good mannered people but he is number one.

“Apparently the good manners are just a cover. Goodness knows what else lurks in that grey-haired head of his.”

“Where is he now?”

“Where else could he be? Ward 5A at Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital. He is nurturing concussions, medications and repercussions.”

Suddenly I smell a good story in the air. To tell you the truth, I could use one right now.

“Save the story until I’m dressed properly.” I rush into the house.

Ten minutes later I’m out of my bedroom door wearing my favourite suit. So far my day has been rotten. Putting a good appearance might turn things around. I’m superstitious and so would you be too if you had a life like mine.

“What’s for breakfast,” I ask in the most diplomatic voice while sitting down at the table; a real breadwinner.

“What else is there for breakfast during this time of the month?” counter asks my wife while laying down the breakfast. She sits down opposite me.
I want to say something chauvinistic to show her who is boss around here but I let it go. It’s not worth it. Not this morning. But soon we must have a little chat. Lately she’s been forgetting which side her bread is buttered. I think she’s listening to too much of that gender equality crap on the radio.

Now, during ‘this time of the month’, our breakfast consist of cooked sweet potatoes and black tea. On a good day, we spoil ourselves to a loaf of bread and some milk.

“Anyway, what happened at Yakobe’s?” I ask while attacking a big chunk of sweet potato. One of the many lessons from my late mother was to never play with my food when I’ve no idea where my next meal is coming from.

“The father-in-law was sleeping with the wife,” says my wife who, at the moment, isn’t eating her share of breakfast. No surprises on where she got the story. We’re surrounded by the ghetto grapevine. Stories get around faster than you can count 1,2,3.

“You mean the father was sleeping with his own daughter? The things we do for lust. Thank goodness some of us are unproductive.”

“Speak for yourself. The affair had been going on for sometime but our elders say ‘No matter how high one flies, he must land someday.’”

“How did he land? He wasn’t caught in the act, was he?” I ask, ignoring my tea.

“No. Yesterday Yakobe came from work and found find his wife crying on the veranda. After some probing, she confessed to him that she is five months pregnant. Since Yakobe officially passed the infertility test, he knew it’s not his. After more probing, she revealed the one responsible.”

“What did old Yakobe do?” I ask still ignoring my now cold tea. The story is hot enough. I’m sweating with anticipation, aren’t I?

“He went straight for the old man, who was playing bawo at Yasini’s, and beat the living lights out of him. It took five men to put poor Yakobe under some sort of control.”

“And all this happened yesterday? How come you didn’t tell me?”

“You mean I should have followed you to that stinky drinking joint just to tell you that story?”

“So now it’s a stinky joint? That stinky joint is where I picked you up.”

“You did not pick me up. You proposed.”
“Whatever. What happened to the wife?”

“He sent her packing. The marriage is over.”

Just like that, the marriage is over. No lawyers, no paperwork. In a few months, that baby will be born into a hopelessly strange world. If he somehow survives the toddler years, he will be doing crime by age ten. Come the teen years, he will be in and out of jail doing all sorts of crimes to survive. Unfortunately, some judge won’t be impressed. Tired of seeing his filthy face in his courtroom, he’ll give him a sentence of about fifteen years. At about twenty-five, he will fall prey to one of those deadly prison diseases. He will be buried together with nine of his unfortunate friends in a grave for one. No funeral, no coffin because the system is convinced it’s just another faceless guy biting the dust. If you ask me, life is one big, sad tale.

“Yakobe is single again,” says my wife like she’s considering switching places. She still hasn’t touched her share of breakfast.

“Why don’t you apply for the position? Two of you would make a perfect couple. The two infertiles.” I’m not sure which one of us, me or my wife, is infertile. I think it’s her and she thinks it’s me. Either way it does not matter. What’s the point of bringing kids into this world if you can’t even afford to feed them?

I want to take a stab in the dark and ask my wife for her share of breakfast. I let the thought go because I’ve tried it before and the answer is always the same. For all you know, she could be saving it for lunch. Anything can happen during this ‘time of the month.’

I finish my tea in one big gulp and wipe the sweat off my forehead with a handkerchief. I stand up and reach into the pockets of my pants. I produce a crumpled K10 note and lay it on the table.

“For whatever,” I say

I head for the door like a rich guy who has just wasted some petty cash on some poor soul. Sooner than later, he’s bound to forget. Not me. The K10 is the only money I had on me. And it’s four days to pay day. Life!

I’m racing towards the general direction of my workplace. The air smells good. Could this be the lucky day after all? Let’s wait and see.

A hundred yards later I’m joined by a fellow workmate. I get to supervise this one and his other fifty friends so he calls me boss.

“Morning boss,” he says while tailing me.
“Morning Yohane,” I answer. “Got enough sleep last night?”

“No boss. The baby cried all night. How about you?”

“Slept like a baby myself,” I say. I’m laughing because of the simile I’ve just created.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t see the funny part of it.

“People who say that don’t have babies,” he says with a blank face. Obviously he hasn’t a slightest clue about the offensive part of his phrase.

“Nice weather, isn’t it?” I say trying to change the subject. Anything but napkin talk.

“Yes boss!”

I look at my watch. The big one is at twelve and the small one is at six. 6 am. We have an hour and a half to walk. And we do this twice a day, five days a week and four weeks a month. A real walk of life!

Part 2:

Right now I’m going shopping. There’s this new shop that has just opened in town. Not that I’m dying to but everyone is going there. I’m sick of seeing everybody carrying identical plastic bags. Everybody but me. Armed with a crisp K100 note I have borrowed I’m on my way. Some of you might laugh but where I’m from that amount of money can see you through two solid weeks.

Passing behind Chichiri Prison I hear loud chattering. For once I’m happy to be where I am. I know an orphan boy of about sixteen who isn’t quite as happy as I am about where he is. He got in trouble with the law of the land by stealing a loaf of bread which, he confessed to the magistrate, he wanted to give his starving brothers and sisters. I suppose if he can shout really loud, I can recognize his voice. You tell me what’s wrong with this life.

Minutes later I’m standing on a queue with my groceries: a loaf of bread, a bottle of cooking oil, and something too personal to mention. From the speakers up there, some fool is playing a love song. You’d think singing love songs is what being a musician is all about. Some of us do not, and probably will never, believe in love.

The total amount for my groceries is K98.50; a calculation I do twenty times in my head in order to be on the safe side; I don’t have extra money on me.
This queue is quite long. I want to go the one on the far side of the shop. There’s only one person on it and it’s located a little far from the exit. I figure that would give me a chance to make a grand exit. I don’t shop every weekend and I don’t shop in places like this. I better make the most out of this experience. For all you know, I could live to cherish this moment. He! He!

Fifteen yards later I’m there. As soon as I join the queue somebody else joins as well. Judging from their scent they must be rich or Caucasian, or both. The lady in my front is paying for a basketful of groceries. Looking at my shopping I’m suddenly embarrassed. I turn to look at the sweet smelling chap behind me but I stop halfway after catching a glimpse of a full basket. I’m even more embarrassed.

Since I can’t look to my front or back, I stare sideways to the queue I was at first. It is still long but there are no big baskets. Something isn’t adding up here. The lady in front of me is through paying for her groceries. It’s my turn.

I place the groceries on the counter, dig into my pocket and produce the K100 note. Instead of punching on her machine, the till lady just stares at me.

I stare back.

“Sir, it’s been a hard day. Let’s not try each other’s patience,” she finally says.

Maybe my money is counterfeit so I give it a real hard look. It’s authentic. What could be the matter?

“Sir please,” she says the voice losing its edge. “What do the sign say?”

“Which sign?” I ask truthfully. To tell you the truth, I’m seeing plenty of signs. The ‘Notices’ sign, for instance.

She points to the one just above my head, which says ‘Ten items or more’.

Needless to say, I’m embarrassed to be there. It’s one of those moments you wish the ground would swallow you alive. My legs are shaking beneath me. I put back the K100 into my pocket, gather my meagre belongings and turn around to apologise to whoever is at my back. It’s an Indian lady. For a split second I catch the look in her eye and I see she’s laughing at me: ‘Just another pauper wasting her time.’ And it’s supposed to be my native country, right? I’m wishing I were one of those evil men who did something to the Indians or just somebody insane with power. Suddenly I’m feeling sick. Sick with the plastic manners of the till lady, the scent of this Indian woman and this whole game called living.
Humbly, I retrace my steps to the till I was at first. You know, the one directly facing the exit. The sign above the teller says ‘Ten items or less’ but I read much more than that. I read ‘This is where you belong, pauper’. I wish I can smash it to pieces.

The Indian lady is now through paying for her groceries. She is making the grand exit I visualized except she has three attendants pushing her stuff. Somehow, I feel robbed. My eyes are following her like sooner or later she will produce a key that will put an end to this misery.

Five minutes later I reach the teller and lay the items on the counter. The till lady fires right away and the total comes up to K98.50. I sigh with relief while digging into my pocket for the cash. No cash. I check into the other pocket. No cash. I check the remaining pockets. Still, no cash. I realize I’ve been robbed. I’m now sweating and mumbling nothings in particular.

“Sir, will you please pay. You are holding up the line,” the teller says.

From my behind I hear some murmurs. I restart the searching procedure and finding nothing I say: “I think I’ve been robbed.”

She beckons to the manager.

“Do we have a problem here,” he says diplomatically. Who teaches these people all these plastic manners? They are sickening.

“Yes sir. This man has been robbed,” says the teller.

“Did you punch the amount into the machine?” The manager asks.

“Yes sir I did,” she answers.

“I’m afraid sir,” says the manager to me while picking up my groceries and giving them to an attendant. “There’s nothing much we can do about it.”

I’m about to protest but security is already there. One of them holds my elbow and says: “This way sir.” The plastic manners again. Now I feel much sicker.

Finally, my wish has been granted. I’m making a grand exit and all eyes are on me. Only it’s not the one I had in mind at first. Life!
2. **The Lesson**

Dear mama,

Guess what? I just turned eight. Isn’t that amazing? I think it is. Aunt Eve thinks so too and she gave me K20 to go celebrate it and I ran all the way to the store, which isn’t far away from Aunt Eve’s house. Mr Phiri is the owner of the store and it has sweets and biscuits and sugar and salt and a lot of stuff.

I run all the way and on my way there I met Chimwemwe. Chimwemwe is also my friend although she is a girl and she is sixteen years old. Sixteen is big don’t you think so, mama? I wonder if I’ll ever reach sixteen. She was standing together on the road with a man who was sitting on the boot of the car. The man was big and dark and had red eyes and was smoking a cigarette and his arm was resting on Chimwemwe’s shoulder. His face was scary and no matter how hard I try to forget it I just can’t forget the face. Sometimes I see him in my dreams. The first time I saw him I was scared also.

He came to Chimwemwe’s house with Chimwemwe’s mother. You should see Chimwemwe’s mother, mama. Her face is always painted with stuff and her lips are always red like blood or black like charcoal. She brings over different men and tells Chimwemwe to call them uncles. I wish I had so many uncles because they get to bring you a lot of sweets and biscuits and gives you money and they take you around in their cars.

This scary man and Chimwemwe’s mother got out of the car and he looked round and round and put his arm around Chimwemwe’s mother and took her into the house. I was in a tree containing mangoes so I guess they could not see me plus I’m young. Nobody really sees you when you are young. Like the time Mr Phiri who owns the store was touching Mrs Moyo across her chest and Mrs Moyo acted like she was crying.

Joe who is my friend also arrived as soon as the scary man and Chimwemwe’s mother got into the house. Joe, who is a year older than me, brought his football which was a birthday present from his father on his birthday. Mother, you said that my father went to fight in a war. When is this war getting over? I hate wars. All they do is take away your fathers so you don’t get presents like footballs and lots of sweets.

Once I asked Joe’s father why he didn’t go to war and he asked what war and he laughed. I told him my father is in war and one day he will be a hero like Rambo and he will come home to you and I will also come home to you and he will bring presents.
Joe took two bricks which Aunt Eve wants to build a fence around her house. When I asked her why she wants to build a fence, she said anything to keep those two away. She said this while pointing towards Chimwemwe and her mother. I did not understand why.

Joe made a goal with the two bricks and made me a goalkeeper and he was a striker. He said when he’s big his father will take him to watch a football game. I wish my father was not in war so we could do a lot of stuff and watch football games.

Joe kicked the ball so hard so that I fail to catch it and it rolled all the way to Chimwemwe’s house and I ran to collect it. When I reached there I was hearing all these crying from Chimwemwe’s mother and I thought she was sick. When I looked through the window I saw them, the scary man and Chimwemwe’s mother and it was horrible. The scary man was on top of Chimwemwe’s mother and he was doing something and I thought he was killing her and I ran away. I was scared and I didn’t tell anybody.

After some time when it was getting dark the scary man left the house. He looked round and got into his car and drove away and I thought he had killed Chimwemwe’s mother.

Later I saw Chimwemwe’s mother leave the house, her face painted and her lips red like blood and she was wearing a skirt that was very short. I was very happy to see she was alive because if she was killed by the scary man, Chimwemwe could have been alone. I love Chimwemwe because she is my friend and she says I’m the only one who understands and the only one who can see the truth because I’m full of innocence. Once I asked her why her mother is always painting her face red like blood or black like charcoal and she laughed. She said she liked my choice of words and she said one day I’ll be a famous poet. Mother, what’s a poet? I have to go to sleep because my arm is tired of writing. I will write you again when I save enough money for postage stamps.

Bye bye.

*A year later*...

Dear mama,

Last week was my birthday but I did no get to celebrate it. There was a funeral and Chimwemwe died while she was having a baby. I have seen the baby and she’s so beautiful and wonderful and innocent just like her mother. All the people say Chimwemwe is dead but I know she’s not. She flew away because that is what she told me when she showed me a bird that sat on the roof before it flew away. She said she would do the same and fly away to a better place
where no one judges you for your shortfalls. Did you know that she never saw her father just like me?

Remember you told me my father was in a war. I’m beginning to think he ran away too just like that scary man who was the father of Chimwemwe’s child. He denied that he was the father even though Chimwemwe said so before the baby was born. Some people are just stupid. How can someone deny a beautiful thing like that small baby?

Chimwemwe’s mother died because of AIDS so they will put Chimwemwe’s baby in a special home. I wish I was old enough to take her as mine because she’s so sweet and so beautiful.

Mother, last week while everyone was at the funeral, me and Joe were eating mangoes at Joe’s house and we met Joe’s grandfather who just arrived from the village. You should see him. He has got a lot of white hair and few teeth in his mouth and he talks in a funny way and has an old stick. Joe says he was born before everyone was born. He told us many stories. The one I liked was about the man who helped an old woman to carry firewood and the old woman turned into a very beautiful girl and they got married and had many beautiful kids. The man was very kind and he played with his kids all the time. He also told us that every man can make a child but only a real man can raise that child up.

Mother, one day I’ll be a real man and make babies and raise them up and do all the stuff Joe used to do with his father. Now I know what a poet is. It is someone who sees things and writes books. When I grow up I’ll write so many books. I miss Chimwemwe so much. And I miss you too, mother. I have to go to sleep.

Bye bye.
3. **Burnt Bridges**

**Part 1:**

The tremors in his forefingers were alternating at about four to six movements per second, he noted. He wished he could take a walk or sleep to decrease them but could not. His legs were very tired and he had insomnia; walking and sleeping were the last things his body could manage.

He was sitting on the concrete barrier of the dam, watching the water fold into waves and disappear, then reappear only to disappear again. About a hundred yards in front, a duck and her three ducklings were busy swimming, without paying much attention to anything. After a while, they started towards his general direction.

Watching them with caution, he took a swig from the half-full rum bottle he somehow managed to hold in his shaky hand, winced, spat and cursed. As soon as the flock got near, he picked a pebble and threw at it. It missed and landed just inches away. He cursed and blamed the tremors in his body.

The duck watched the spreading ripples with caution. She then inched closer to protect her young ones. The man threw another pebble and it blushed one of the ducklings. He smiled. The duck, sensing the unnecessary hatred, led its flock away.

He watched them and felt jealous. The duck was succeeding with something he had failed miserably. He sneered and took another swig. The wrinkles on his sixty-year-old forehead increased as the drink settled in his cancer infected body. He winced again.

A moment later, a goliath heron suddenly appeared. It waded above the water for some time, as if to attract his attention, and then landed on the other side of the dam. Like a statue it positioned itself directly in front of him. He watched it and smiled.

Raising the shaky bottle he whispered: “This is for you, you gutless creature. Sixty years and what have you to show the world?”

He took another swig and spat.

“Sixty years!” he muttered and turned his attention to the waters. The water, especially these waters, had always attracted him, he thought. They had always been his listener. Through thick and thin, and his life had been just that, they had always been there for him, always ready to listen. As a child growing up, he had spent almost all his free time here. He usually came to
swim or just to dream and wish for a better life. The waters never answered but they listened all the same. Many a time he had wished he could turn into a fish and swim to the bottom of the dam, never to come back to land again.

Fifteen years ago, after discovering the shaking palsy, he tried to hang himself but couldn’t. Instead he had gotten drunk and decided he would drown himself. His old companion, these waters, only sobered him up. Feeling betrayed he had cursed the waters, cursed his dead father, cursed himself, cursed life for being so unfair, and cursed the drink for having so much control over his life. He went home, beat his pregnant wife and his ten-year-old child, and left. Now, after such a long time, these waters still attracted him.

The temperature was mild and the dry winds were rustling trees behind him. It was a beautiful day. He watched the waters.

Part 2:

The young man was standing about a hundred yards away from the man, as erect as the pine trees that were behind him and as motionless as the bird on the other side of the dam. He had been watching the man’s back for the past fifteen minutes. Just watching and waiting. A thought that maybe it wasn’t him crossed his mind. He prayed it was him. The timing was right and the anger too ripe.

‘How do you regain lost dignity?’ he whispered to no one in particular. ‘Go back where you lost it and search for it,’ he answered himself.

The man was back to reconcile with his past. To try and work out what could have been. When he threw a pebble at the ducks, the young man noticed the shaking in his hand. He smiled. That hand once gave a serious beating, both to him and his pregnant mother. Shouting obscenities in front of their neighbours, the man had accused his mother of infidelity. Soon afterwards he had packed some clothes and left, leaving behind the boy and his unemployed mother. Overnight, the boy was transformed from one praying for emancipation to one destined to guarantee it. In an instant, he changed from a boy with a running nose to a husband and father to be. Months later, his mother passed away while giving birth to a baby boy.

Together with his baby brother, they were transferred to an uncle where more abuse waited for them. Four years later, when his brother was old enough to walk, they packed and entered the streets. The streets raised them. It turned them into hardened men before they could enjoy the joys and innocence of youth. The streets, where survival by any means was the name of the game, raised them.
He was a good father to his young brother, he thought. In a cruel world, he had taught him survival. Not many people would approve his ways but he did not care. Since no one was there to teach them, no one was qualified to judge them. Yet deep down was a longing to be taught and not be criticised. Truth be told, he was just a young man forced to numb whatever pain he experienced. Yet ironically, it was the same pain that pushed him on to face another hopeless day. ‘There had to be something at the end of that pain,’ he reasoned. That kept him going when most of his friends were taking their own lives.

His face had always troubled him. Every time he looked into a mirror, he saw his father. He saw a man stuck in an unhappy childhood, talking and crying in his sleep; a man drinking to escape recurring nightmares. Like the man, he also had nightmares although he didn’t drink to forget them. As far as he was concerned, he had a grip on things. The only thing that scared him was losing that grip. Plus there was his younger brother, his son.

‘The beatings will one day stop,’ his mother used to promise. ‘Maybe today’ he thought. He was elated, like one about to witness something he’s believed in all his life. It was a beautiful day. He watched the man.

Part 3:

The boy, just like the young man, was standing about a hundred yards away from the man. But unlike the young man, he was neither erect nor motionless. He was very restless, moving to, fro and sideways, like someone who wants to answer nature’s call but for some reason can’t.

He was dying to see the man’s face. This was it. This was the defining moment. It was time and he could hardly contain his excitement. And fear. Fear that the face would somehow let him down. Many years were spent on constructing that face. A face wholly constructed on instinct. There was no photograph and his brother never described that face to him. The only thing his brother described, and this he did sincerely, was what they will do to the man in future. An early lesson drummed into his head, it stuck like a habit. He hoped the face would not disappoint.

From where he stood, he could only see the man’s back and the unkempt hair. He knew the man was drinking. He had to be. Alcohol controlled him.

His brother never allowed him to drink. He was once caught drinking spirits with the other street kids. It was a sunny day, he remembered. He must have been about seven and the alcohol was stolen from one of the shops in town. Disguised in yogurt bottles, they drank it while begging. When he suddenly bumped into his brother, the guiltiness in his eyes gave him away. The first and
last time his brother beat him up and the day the anti-alcohol message chiselled itself in his psyche.

When then man raised his hand to the bird that stood on the far side of the dam, he saw both the shaking arm and the drink. That hand brought so much misery in their household, he was told. That hand once beat him while he was still in his mother’s womb. Stripped his mother and his brother in front of the neighbours, it did. When he was five, his brother recollected those dark tales to him and the empathy one experiences at knowing the suffering of one’s kin firmly registered itself on his mind. Now he could swear at knowing and experiencing that kind of pain.

Now it was payback time. He watched the man.

Part 4:

She stood between the two parties, about fifty yards on either side. She positioned herself to shield them from each other. Together with the young man they talked about payback. She encouraged it back then but not now. Now it didn’t matter. She wished there was a way to tell them that. To tell them it’s okay. To tell them the pain can go if they could only see.

The young one could no longer contain his excitement. He started towards the man. The older one followed. With her arms stretched as sideways as they could go, she tried blocking their way. They passed through her very easily, the way one enters into a fog. She tried it again but the same thing happened. Seeing that there was nothing she could do, she left. She could not bear to see. Not again.

The old man, whose hearing was impaired, did not hear their approaching footsteps. They reached him, each one on either side. Looking into the water, the man could clearly see their reflected faces. Immediately he recognized them. The younger one resembled his mother: soft, harmless features. They were meeting for the first time. The older one, he knew, resembled him.

He wanted to say something but words failed him. He tried getting up but was pushed back down by the older one. The younger one reached over his shoulder and wrestled the bottle out of his hand. He smashed it against the barrier and fragments of glass flew all over. The shaking in the man’s hands increased.

“Payback time,” shouted the older one. The younger one moved in and threw a kick punch. It landed on the man’s waist. Before the man could scream, another blow had landed on the head. He screamed.

“Fight back you fool!” shouted the younger one. “Fight back!”
Another kick landed in the waist again. He winced and tried to surrender by raising his hands. They pulled him up, each holding a hand and they turned him around. They were facing each other. The younger one had a first look at his father. He was not disappointed.

“Fight back you monster!” he shouted. A slap landed across the man’s face and he lost balance and fell on the barrier again. The two stomped and kicked him with their legs until he was barely breathing. Then they left him. A few metres away, they heard water splashing. When they turned around, the man was nowhere to be seen.

“It’s over,” said the young one.

“No. This is a new beginning.”

They watched the ripples on where the man had disappeared.

“Did I tell you he always wanted to be a fish?” asked the older one.

“No.”

“He did, the fool. Let’s go.”

Moments later, the ripples cleared and the goliath heron flew away. This time it did not wade above the waters.
4. One more flute song

NOBODY knew where the man who sat on the corner where two main roads intersected had come from or why he played the blues. But came he did and played the blues on his flute he also did. And no one knew where he lived. Some speculated that he lived under a bridge but that was never proven. No one cared enough to actually follow him after dark to find out.

He used to come early in the morning, around six, carrying a dirty bag and a sack. He’d lay the sack and sit on it before taking out his breakfast from his bag, all the while mumbling words that didn’t make much sense. Soon after breakfast, he’d produce his flute and start playing the blues.

I had a vending stand nearby where I used to sell Cape Town apples. In those days Cape Town apples were considered expensive by many. As a result, I’d spend most of my time, not selling the apples but listening to the man. In fact I listened to him the whole day. Some people passing by would drop him a coin or two, or just look at him with pity in their eyes.

One morning he came, not around six but after eight o’clock in the morning. This was very unusual because in the six months I’d known him, the six months I’d stayed around the corner, he was never late. That same morning, instead of him playing the flute and me listening, we talked. We talked about nothing in particular until we got to the subject of love. That’s when he told his story.

She was nineteen and he was twenty-six when they first met, he said. It was love at first sight. In her he saw innocence and purity while in him she saw all that she ever wanted in a man, and more. But when their love developed into something deep he got scared and denounced both her and the love she gave him. Taking what seemed the easiest way out, he run away. It turned out to be hardest.

Five years later he wrote her a letter and told her to forget about him and marry somebody else. She answered that she can love no other but him. It was only fifteen years later when he realised that playing the flute and looking miserable was not the answer. Embracing that true love was.

When he told me he was going back to his true love I begged him to play me one flute song. I’d grown to love the sound of his flute. He said he’d play once and no more. His love had waited for him long enough. She shouldn’t wait any longer.

He played the last one the way he played the others. The only difference was the glow on his face. “This last one I’ll call goodbye,” he said while handing me the flute. “A memento. I’m going back to the lady who stole my heart. Never
try to run away from love my friend. It’s pointless. True love may be scary but it’s worth it.”

We shook hands and he left.

Nowadays, if you happen to pass by the busy place where two main roads cross, you’ll definitely find a chap who fell in love with the flute. The apple business never took off so I play all day long. Some days I get nothing some days I get something. I don’t complain. True love may be scary but it’s worth it.
5. **Bared souls**

She sat there, her head in her arms, looking very tired and disappointed. She was very tired. She was tired of it all: the thinking, the hurting, and, most importantly, the disease itself. And she was disappointed too, especially with Maggie, her former best friend. Maggie, of all people! How could she desert her at a time like this? How could she? She just couldn’t believe it. Maggie, of all people! All those promises they gave each other! She couldn’t believe all those promises were for nothing.

She wished Maggie could see past her fear, or whatever it was that made her so afraid. It was just a disease for goodness sake! Disease or no disease, AIDS or no AIDS, she was still the same person. All her human feelings were there. All the things Maggie liked in her were still there.

How could Maggie, of all the people, be so blind? How could she? It wasn’t right. She should have known better. She should have. Instead, she was somewhere feeling ashamed and miserable. She knew Maggie was feeling miserable. If it were her deserting Maggie, she would have felt miserable too. ‘And she deserves to feel miserable,’ she thought. ‘Life is about choices. Maggie shouldn’t have made that choice. She shouldn’t have. If she was miserable wherever she was then that was a good thing. Maybe misery will finally open her eyes and her heart.’

She remembered the moments they shared. Moments so precious they were forever printed in their heart. As kids they promised each other to always be friends and always be there for each other. She believed all that. She had no choice but to.

She tried to putting herself in Maggie’s shoes. She tried imagining what came over her. She couldn’t understand it. As far as her beliefs went, she’d never desert Maggie. Not even if she had committed the most horrible crime. Yet, somehow, she had deserted her because of a silly disease. It hurt very much. She’d never desert Maggie. Not even in a million years.

When the first symptoms appeared she went to see a doctor. He told her of the presence of antibodies to the HIV virus. She lied to Maggie that it was just food poisoning. And later Maggie used this as an excuse for deserting her. That it was five years ago didn’t matter. “Why didn’t you tell me in the first place? I could have prepared.” Maggie said. ‘Prepared for what?’ She wondered. And the whole three weeks she suffered the initial symptoms, Maggie was there by her side. Thinking it was just food poisoning, she took good care of her. That was the Maggie she knew. The Maggie she thought would never desert her.
A month ago when the HIV infection progressed into AIDS, she told her the truth. And Maggie deserted her. At first she tried to make excuses.

“Well didn’t you tell me in the first place? I could have prepared. You don’t just throw something like this in someone’s face.”

“I’m not throwing this in front of someone’s face. I’m telling it to a friend. I’m telling it to a sister.”

“You know what,” Maggie said, “I’ll need time to think about this.”

“What’s there to think about?” she asked her. “I’m very sick and I need you.”

“This is not easy for me you know,” Maggie said.

“And I suppose it’s easy for me?” she asked.

“I don’t know. You are the one who got it.”

“Maggie,” she said tears dripping from her eyes. “Please take those words back. You know me better than that. Besides, nobody and I repeat nobody, deserves this disease.”

“You know what,” Maggie said, “give me some time to think about all this.”

“What about me? Maggie I need you. Maggie I’m very scared. I’m very very scared.”

“I’m so sorry. I have to go. I’ll call you.”

She left.

“Maggie! Come back here! I need you! Maggie!”

She slumped on the sofa and cried the night away.

For the next three days she sat by the phone and waited for a phone call that never came.

Now, a week later, she could still not believe it. The appointment with the doctor was for 10 am. She had thirty more minutes to ponder on why Maggie wasn’t there by her side holding her hand.

Standing in the doorway, hands akimbo and legs crossed, she felt very ashamed with herself. She was not sure whether to get in or to leave. Looking at her friend, she felt pity. She saw how small and beaten she looked. Her head which
was in her hands shook every few minutes. She never shook her head before. She wasn’t the same girl she knew. The girl she knew would never shake her head because of a disease. This was a stranger inhabiting her body. The vibrancy towards life was not there anymore. Sitting there with her face in her hands! This wasn’t the Susie she knew. This was a stranger. She knew she was wholly responsible for the change in her friend. ‘What was I thinking?’ she asked herself. ‘Deserting her like that! What was I thinking?’

She had denied her best friend! She had denied Susie. Susie, of all people! A week ago, she could not believe what she did. Feeling miserable, she tried to apologize but it was impossible. Every time she picked up the phone to call her she couldn’t dial her number. She was very ashamed. She tried convincing herself that Susie was also to blame by not telling her earlier but that only made things worse. ‘That can’t be an excuse,’ she rebuked herself. ‘That was five years ago. That can’t be an excuse.’ There was no excuse. With tears in her eyes, Susie had begged to stay. And she had walked out on her best friend.

She imagined what Susie was feeling right now. Would she be able to forgive her? Would she accept her apologies? There was nothing she needed more than her forgiveness. ‘Maybe yes, maybe no,’ she thought. Susie was a very strong person. She might say no to any of her apologies. She was capable of taking care of herself. And it’s been a week. So much can happen in a week. She was a typical example. She barely ate, barely slept, and had lost some weight. All that in a week.

Susie had screamed for her but she had kept going. She had screamed and cried for her. She could never forgive her, she thought. And she couldn’t blame Susie. She had no right to forgive her. She deserved it. If only she could forgive her. But the damage was already done, she continued. What she had done was unpardonable. It was unheard of. People in their right mind can never desert their friends because they are sick. It’s against all the rules of mankind. What if it was her? How would she be feeling right now?”

Susie raised her head and looked at the time on the wall, directly above Maggie’s head. It was 9:45. She was about to put her head back into her hands when she sensed someone looking at her. Then she saw her, standing by the door and looking miserable. One look at her and she knew Maggie was sorry. She probably was sorrier than she imagined. Slowly, still sitting down, she stretched her arm towards her, beckoning her to come. Maggie thought her eyes were lying so she rubbed them. Susie laughed and mimed the words ‘It’s okay. Come.’ Reading her lips, Maggie finally believed she was calling her. She cried and laughed at the same time. She went to her.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. Can you forgive me?”
“I’m so sorry for lying to you in the first place. I should’ve told you the truth. Can you forgive me?”

“That was nothing. Can you forgive me? I’m willing to do anything.”

“Anything?”

“Yes! Anything.”

“Then go climb Mount Mulanje for me.” Maggie was afraid of heights.

Maggie paused. Then she said: “I’ll do it!”

“Of course you wont you lizard. You couldn’t climb anything even if it meant your life. Come here. I want to feel you in my arms.”

Maggie squatted and they hugged.

“You’ve lost weight. Why are you losing weight? I’m the one who’s sick here.”

They laughed.

“Susie, this feels good.”

“Of course. How did you know I was here?”

“I saw the note on your refrigerator.”

“How did you get into my house?”

“I broke in. Of course I used my key. This feels good Susie.”

“Of course it feels good. Never ever try to leave me again. Ever.”

“I promise. And this time, I’m keeping this promise by all means.”

“You better. Come on, give me your hand and let’s go.”

“Where?”

“To see the Doctor.”
6. Swimming Upstream

JUROR no. 1 looks like she has kids. Maybe one, maybe two, maybe three. My mother had two kids. It’s a pity she didn’t see us grow up. Or maybe it’s not a pity. Maybe it’s a good thing. The way my sister and me turned out. Or the way they turned us out. I’m sure juror no. 1 can understand. Maybe she can listen too. Most of them don’t. They only pretend to. And they don’t understand at all because it’s so easy to shut it all off. Juror no. 1 has some compassion in her.

Juror no. 4 is so full of himself. He likes what he sees in the mirror. I’m sure he likes everything about himself too. Everything short of what he sees in the mirror isn’t good enough. I have met his kind many times. And many times they’ve given me the ‘This world could have been a better place if it weren’t for people like you’ look. Juror no. 4 is a very scared man.

“...Your honour, the state calls its last witness. We call Mai Phiri to the stand.”

Mai Phiri. In my life, I’ve met many people who are disgusted with me. But none of them like this woman.

“...Could you state what you do for the record?”

“I run the Free Love Orphanage.”

The free Love Orphanage should be called the Free Hell Orphanage. It’s pure hell. There’s nothing loving about that place or, for that matter, that woman. An opportunist, she discovered early how much weight the word love carries. How people become blind whenever that word is uttered. That woman killed me. It’s a wonder I’m still here. Or maybe it’s the reason I’m here. She should be the one on trial.

In this life things are so obvious it’s a wonder people don’t notice. Maybe it’s because they are too obvious. Why did I run away from Free Love Orphanage? Who runs away from a place they are loved? And what are we doing here? Why are we wasting time? They all know I’m guilty. The lawyer they allocated me knows, the state lawyer knows, the judge knows, and the jury know. Yes, even the jury of my peers know I’m guilty. My peers!

If it mattered at all, I’d tell you I’m not guilty. But it doesn’t matter for you probably think I’m guilty too. The truth, if it exists at all, doesn’t matter. Labels matter. Some are labelled angels while some are labelled devils. Good for you if you are labelled an angel, a good doer. Shame on you if you are labelled a devil, an evildoer.
Juror no. 8 seems to be reading my mind. He wants to get out of here. He has other things he’d rather be doing. Maybe he wants to go home and watch a movie. His mind is already made up. He wants to get out of here.

“Your honour, the state rests its case.”

“Defence counsel, call your first witness.”

“The defence calls the accused to the stand.”

“What? That’s suicidal!”

“I know your honour. He insisted.”

The judge looks at me with what he wants to pass as pity. But I know better. Eighteen years in the streets is no joke.

“Well, ask the questions.”

“No questions your honour. He has something to say.”

“My, My. And I thought I had seen it all. Go on.”

“What are we doing here?” I simply say.

The whole court is dumbfounded. I’ve caught them unawares. They were expecting some pleading on my part. I’m tired of pleading. No more.

“Why are we wasting time? We all know the verdict. Why all the protocol? Just give me the sentence so we can all go wherever it is we want to go. There’s no justice in this room just like there’s no justice in this world. I didn’t do all those things you’re accusing me of. Just give me the sentence because I’m sick and tired. Just make sure the sentence is a very long one. Make it short and I just might do what you are accusing me of. I can promise you that.”

With those words I leave for my seat. Juror no. 1 has tears in his eyes. She understands but can’t do anything about it. Or can she? She better be strong. People like her see things. They understand the pain but can’t do anything. As a result, something nags at them. If they are not strong enough, they crack.

Juror no. 1 better be strong or else one day she’ll crack. Whether she knows or not, she’s also swimming upstream.
7. **Lawyers in heaven?**

She was a fifteen-year-old girl who looked younger than her years when she passed on. Mr. Phiri, who spent his days playing bawo on my shop’s veranda, thought she looked nine. His bawo partner, Mr. Mofolo, went to the extreme by claiming she looked seven. Once, she asked him, how it was possible for one to look over half her age. He said he didn’t know how but she did. Between you and me, she looked ten.

She thought she looked her age, which was fine by her. And never one to spend time proving all sorts of things provable, she didn’t like to talk about it. On some occasions, some rare occasions indeed, when she felt like talking or justifying her age, she’d say her late mother had her birth papers. Since both her mother and the papers weren’t there anymore, that was the end of the story.

For someone so young, she had a steady mind. When she was old enough, she said, she was going to be a lawyer. Not older, not thirty or forty, but old enough. And this confused us a lot too. ‘Just how old is old enough?’ We’d ask ourselves.

And everyone in our small town knew this. She used to tell anyone who cared to listen her ambition. In this case, there happened to be many. She used look you dead in the eye and say ‘I’m going to be a brilliant lawyer when I’m old enough. And I’ll make all the difference too.’ And being someone who had a way with people, almost everyone believed her. Who wouldn’t, with all the sincerity and innocence she used?

Nobody knew why she wanted to be a lawyer and she couldn’t say why. Both her parents, who passed away when she was eight due to HIV/AIDS complications, were not lawyers. Her auntie, the one raising her single handedly, was not a lawyer. In fact, no one in her family was a lawyer. Yet, somehow, she wanted to be one.

I’m not a lawyer nor was I one when we became friends. I was and, thanks to her, I still am a bookseller. Unlike her who had a steady mind, my dream was not to become a bookseller. I ventured into it after no one was willing to employ me, a man with an arts degree. And to tell you the truth, it’s not much of a business either. Most folks around here don’t buy books. I keep going on because I feel like I owe her to go on.

When I first moved to this part of town and opened this bookshop, she was a thirteen-year old who looked nine. She was the first person to come into the shop and welcome me. She was glad for she reasoned that the shop would save
her the time she spent walking to the library located on the other side of the town. Lately she’d been feeling a little tired, she confessed.

Anyway, after that she would come into this very shop everyday after school. She’d spend at least two hours reading anything, from geography to literature. She could not afford to buy books so I used to let her read here. Always careful with a book, she cherished them almost to a point of worshipping them. One time she confessed that if she wasn’t going to be a lawyer she was going to deal in books. Both, she justified her confession, had the potential to make a huge difference to the world.

When at eleven her auntie told her the truth about her parents’ death, she told me one day, she started reading everything on HIV/AIDS she could find in the library. And her auntie didn’t have to tell her that she had the virus and that she was at a high risk. She figured this on her own. She also knew that her auntie had taken too long to tell her. Still, that didn’t deter her from reaching her dream of becoming a lawyer.

One day she looked up from a book she was reading and confessed, in an earnest voice, that she thought her HIV infection had turned into AIDS. She added that all the constitutional symptoms, symptoms like fatigue and fever, had been occurring in her for quite some time now.

“It’s ok. You’re not dying,” I assured her.

“I didn’t say I was dying,” she answered, always so sure of herself. “I said I think I have AIDS. I’m still going to be a lawyer.”

When she passed away, people in our small town could not believe it. I couldn’t believe it either. She was very sick but what about her dream? That dream was so real and so firm it just couldn’t die like that.

It was only when I saw her face for the last time during the funeral that I started entertaining the idea that maybe she really was dead.

We buried her on a wet afternoon. The whole town was there to say goodbye to her and her dream.

“Where do innocent girls killed by a disease they didn’t deserve go?” Somebody asked on our way back.

“Probably to heaven,” he was answered.

“Then there must be lawyers in heaven,” he reasoned.
“Knowing her and knowing how real her dream was, there really must be lawyers in heaven,” I said. “Some dreams can never falter. They can never die.”
8. **One Sad, Sordid Tale**

THE amount of pain in their pain is just too much. It is visible like the tallest mountain and deep it can cover an abyss. They can’t be relieved of this pain. Why, you ask? It’s because their system won’t let them. And they are the system.

Trapped is the word best used to describe their situation. Every single moment pain is hitting them to the ground. Do they give in? No! They get up and pretend nothing has happened. The next moment, the same thing happens. Such is their system.

I once belonged to that system: I lived the way they live, dreamed the way they dream, and cried the way they cry. As far as that system is concerned, I was a somebody. Somebody they could point their dirty fore fingers and say ‘There he goes’ when I passed them in my black B.M.W. I pitied them back then. Now I don’t. Now I laugh at them at heart.

Their system messed with my life and I did something they can’t understand. They can’t understand because I can’t tell them. And since I can’t tell them, let alone talk about it, they brand me mad beyond reasonable doubt. They even put it down on paper that I passed the madness test. They say all my right senses are destroyed but I say all of them are here with me. How about my sense of sight? I can see them suffer in their system, can’t I? How about my sense of smell? I can smell their troubles, can’t I? Or how about my sense of hearing? I can hear them talk about me like I’m trash, can’t I? They think they know better but they lack profundity. All their ideas and beliefs are based on assumptions.

I suppose you are wondering why I’ve decided to put this down on paper. In the first place, it was not my idea. One of them suggested they give me paper and ink. They figured since I can’t tell it to anybody, I might as well put it down on paper. They are dying to know why I did it. I can tell by looking beyond their masqueraded faces.

When they bring me food, they throw their eyes here and there, searching for these papers. They won’t get their dirty hands on them because as soon as I’m through writing, I’ll burn them. I’ve got a matchbox hidden under my pillow. But they don’t know that.

I can’t show them the papers just like I can’t tell them why I did it. I couldn’t tell my lawyer either. And I couldn’t tell the judge who presided over my case. Yes, even after the threats to hold me in contempt of court. After making a jackass of himself, breaking his gavel in the process, he finally gotten round to giving me my jail sentence: 25 years to life. Case closed.
Prison was their last resort. It was the place they figured I might crack up and talk. Maybe even say I’m sorry. I neither confessed nor apologised. The prison warden and his sidekicks tortured me for hours on end. It gave them something to do but sooner than later they gave up. They couldn’t stand the torturing.

Finally, after running out of ideas, the system confined me into these four walls in a mental institution. I’m not ma. It’s just something they’d like to believe. So I play their game and let them believe what they want to. The day they brought me here one of them observed and I quote: “His is one sad sordid tale. How do you move from a qualified brain surgeon to a nutcase?” If he only knew!

The room they gave me is medium sized, five meters long and four metres wide. It contains a bed attached to a wall, a basin, and a bathroom. Its walls are snow-white, the colour my late wife wore, both at our wedding and our fifteenth anniversary. The same colour her face wore after I choked the life out of her. Often times, I hear her strangled voice from these white walls begging for mercy and forgiveness. If fate can allow me a second chance, I’d love to strangle her over again. Even now, almost a year later, I still hate that bitch.

See, it’s the hate that made me do it. They have their masters and doctorate degrees yet can’t that figure out. Why is there war in places like the Middle East? It’s the hate and the contempt. And they expect me to open my sealed lips when they ask me why I did it.

Today I’m to meet a psychiatrist. They are sending a shrink to examine a brain surgeon. Isn’t that something? They don’t know that I know.

Time is exactly 11 am. I hear footsteps outside my room. Seconds later I hear keys turning in the door. I quickly fold up the papers and stuff them in my underwear. Two men in white dustcoats enter.

“Let’s go,” says one of them. Their faces are wearing indifferent expressions. ‘Let’s do this and get it over with,’ they seem to say but I know better. These guys are excited. As soon as they drop me at the shrink’s office, they will come back for the papers. They are in for a surprise.

It’s a ‘she’ shrink. She’s a broad of around thirty-five with fake braided hair, lots of face make up, and lots of pink lipstick. Everything about her screams ‘notice me!’ She’s wearing a midnight blue suit. The same type my wife wore the day I killed her. Looking at this shrink has triggered an old memory of love mingled with hate. Now, there’s a combination.

She is saying something but my thoughts are occupied with visions of my strangled wife. What can I say about her? She was beautiful and I loved her. She was a first class flirt but I still loved her. She slept around a lot but I loved
her all the same. At first I’d fool myself that someday things will change. The more time went by, the more she slept around, and the more I loved her. And hated her.

At the back of my mind is the day I killed her. I remember leaving my hospital earlier than usual because we were to eat out and celebrate our sixteenth wedding anniversary. I also remember the cries of love making...maybe I shouldn’t call it that. I remember the cries humans make when they are copulating I heard when I opened the front door of my house. Sometimes I also hear these cries from the walls in my room. The more I hear them, the more I want to choke her again. They were copulating in the lounge of our house.

The love and the hate I had for her crashed in my heart, or my head, or wherever it is these feelings are kept. After crashing, they produced a feeling I can’t explain up to now.

I didn’t even bother to check who the other lover was. I just pulled him off her and smashed his head to the wall. Thud! He gave a faint groan and fell to the ground. He was dead in less than ten seconds.

She, meanwhile, just crouched in a corner hugging her knees. She was screaming her apologies while begging for mercy and proclaiming her true love for me. I went for her and choked her with my bare hands. The last words she said were ‘I’m sorry’. Sorry for what? I called the police and told them I have just killed two people. I gave them the address and waited. That was the last time I spoke.

So this shrink is reminding me of her. Instead of her I’m picturing my late wife. I’m now remembering the good times we shared: the college days, the courting, the wedding, the honeymoon and the passionate lovemaking. For a moment, I’m tempted to smile but I can’t. The shrink might mistake this as a sign of cooperation. I wouldn’t allow her that much satisfaction. As far as I’m concerned, she is in the system and the system is what I hate. But they don’t know that. They think it’s something very complicated. One of them suggested that maybe it is the fear of what might happen to me once I spill my guts. But it is not. Is not fear an emotional and physiological response to recognised sources of danger? I don’t recognise any danger. If it was fear, I’d have cracked when they were torturing me in their prisons.

And it’s not death either. I know you think it’s death. I’ve reached a point where I don’t mind dying. Death is something I can inflict upon myself in under a minute. I can wear a plastic bag over my head and pull it tight with a string but that’s silly. It would make them feel like winners. I don’t think my spirit would enjoy the sight of beer and champagne flowing because I couldn’t hold it together in their system.
What I need and what can make me talk is a man of God or a priest or someone who believes in anything but this life. But that is something they cannot figure out because most of them don’t believe in God or anything anyway. They think they know better. And until they can figure out what I want, I’m going to continue playing Mr Nutcase and waste their time. I have no goals to fulfil and plenty of time on my hands.

The shrink is still reminding me of my late wife so I’m forced to stare at the palms of my hands. If I don’t, I might stare in her face long enough to trigger an old frame of love and hate.

She mistakes this simple gesture as a sign of shyness. And she says: ‘I can help you out but first you have to trust me. We can be friends.’

The bitch has got to be kidding me!
9. The Good Samaritan

WHEN he first saw her he knew she was the one. He lifted his eyes to the skies above and whispered a simple prayer. Then he turned to the man beside him and told him he was in love.

He went to where the girl was sitting, an ice cream cone in her hand and a sad look on her face. He sat down and recited in a gentle voice:

*Smile sweet lady*
*Smile for me*
*And let your eloquent full lips part*
*Let them part*
*So your cotton white teeth can reflect*
*The morning sun’s rays into my soul*
*Promising rays to kill this sentiment in me*
*And flourish my innermost being.*

She listened patiently until he was done. Then she asked him if he had the three C’s. He asked her what the three C’s were and she answered ‘car,’ ‘cell phone,’ and ‘cash.’ He answered no. All he had for her was true love. This true love, he added, was worth much more than a million three C’s.

She thought for a moment and, after taking a big lick off the big ice cream she told him to come to her after getting the three C’s and nothing else. Then she left. He watched his true love leave while trying to figure out a way how to change her thinking. ‘Some things can’t be changed instantly,’ he reasoned. Some things need time.

Some time passed before they met again. This time she wasn’t licking any ice cream. She was in a blackout, lying in a dirty ditch beside the road. He took her into his humble home and tucked her in, his true love. Later he called a doctor to examine her. The report the doctor wrote soon after showed a severe rape case. Apart from the bruised face and the broken arms, there were traces of forced entry and semen.

When she came around she was asked what had happened. ‘She didn’t remember much,’ she confessed. She did remember, though, meeting some guy who had the three C’s. They hooked and went to a certain party. She also remembered being given a strong drink, a vodka maybe. After that everything went blank. She was also asked if she wanted to press charges. She declined saying let bygones be bygones.

Three months later when the bruises had disappeared inside her skin and the arms could carry things again, she was ready to go wherever she had come
from. The man then gave her the offer of true love and the security of marriage. The girl said yes for she was done with looking for materialistic security. She added that maybe in time she could be able to love him the way he loved her. He said it didn’t matter.
The staleness hung heavily in the small dark stinky room. It could be felt. He was sitting on a chair besides his personal computer, waiting for the time to strike twelve noon so could download the latest explicit pictures from adultworld.com. Five more minutes to go. He didn’t know why he waited for the clock to strike exactly 12 noon. Maybe it was a habit. He stretched his hand and, without looking, reached for a beer can. He emptied it in one go and threw the empty can on the floor. It met other empty cans and together they gave a clinking sound. He waited.

At exactly twelve noon his wall clock chimed and he booted his computer. Suddenly there was light; not enough to fill the whole room but enough to illuminate his face very clearly. It revealed a great beard, red swollen eyes, and plenty of unkempt hair that had started to interlock.

He launched his web browser and it took him to his favourite site. He clicked on e-mail and seconds later he was in his inbox. Twenty unread mail. He checked the senders. Eighteen were the downloads he was waiting for. One simply titled I love Mary looked like a virus so he deleted it. The twentieth one from chikondi@ucp.cn titled ‘I’m coming to get you’ nearly stopped his heart. It was sent on 3 January, two weeks ago on the last day he checked his mail.

He wanted to delete it but thought otherwise. Instead he opened it. Just then, his dogs outside started barking ferociously. He left the computer, manoeuvred his way in the dark to the window, opened the curtain just a fraction and peeked. He saw nothing but daylight. It blinded him. He rubbed his eyes and peeked again. Kids from the neighbourhood were picking mangoes from a branch that leaned over the fence, into the street. The mangoes were now ripe. The last time he went out, they were not.

He cursed and went back to the computer. The e-mail, now open, was flushed on the screen. It was very brief and straight to the point:

Dear Joe,

I’m sorry about what I did to you. Can we try to put the past behind us and try to start again? I just realized that it’s you I truly love. No one else. Remember the good times we shared...

He paused. Yes, he remembered the good times. In fact he remembered them vividly like a recurring dream. He also remembered the love they had once shared. How perfect they were for each other. Then there was the scholarship she was offered to study in Canada. Yes, he remembered. How about the letter she had wrote him a week before her departure? Or how about the way he had
pleaded with her not to end the relationship? How he had proclaimed his true love for her? Yes he remembered. The dark days, the sleepless nights, the bad dreams, and the nightmares. How could he forget?

...in the past. Let’s give it a try once again.

I’m coming home on 14 January. I have return tickets for two and I have found you a very good school here in Canada. I love you Joe. I should be in Blantyre at around mid-day. I can hardly wait to see you again.

I love you. Bye.

He closed his inbox and signed out, completely forgetting the downloads. His mind was in ecstasy. He started to laugh, a deep mockery laugh like a hyenas. He was still laughing when the dogs started to bark again. He stopped for a moment.

He thought of his heavily locked doors, the ferocious dogs outside, and the heavy chains on the gate and. He felt safe.

Still laughing, he launched his web browser again and entered his inbox. He opened the mail and clicked reply. He simply typed:

You are too late! Love doesn’t live here anymore! You can go to hell and stay there...

He clicked send. Then remembering the downloads, he laughed some more.
11. Malawian Blue

“THAT’S Malawian blue!”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s the kind of blue you can only get in Malawi!”

“The sky is the same blue no matter where you are.”

“But this is different. This is Malawian blue! And there’s only one thing that can produce this kind of blue. Look at it!”

“What’s the one thing?”

“This lake! The lake of stars!”

“I’m not buying that.”

“You can’t buy the truth. The truth is free for all who seek it.”

“So that’s the truth?”

“Yes! In living colour.”

“I have two masters’ degrees from one of the finest schools in America. You expect me to buy that?”

“Once again you can’t…”

“Yeah, yeah I know. Ok, suppose what you are saying is true. What’s so special about this Malawian Blue?”

“It is a bringer of happiness.”

“Yeah right!”

“It is true. Take a look around, what do you see?”

“I see people. Lot’s of people.”

“What’s so special about all these people?”

“I really can’t tell.”
“I’ll tell you. It is a thing called happiness. Look at your fellow tourists! Look at the locals. These locals are some of the poorest people in the world. They are probably the some of the happiest people too.”

“Malawian blue, huh?”

“Yes, Malawian blue. How about you? Are you happy? Is your life worth living, master degrees or no master degrees?”

“I don’t know. I guess now I’m happy. But to tell you the truth, I wouldn’t say that about my life.”

“Why don’t you start all over?”

“Just how do you start all over? How do you erase forty-three years of living, albeit a meaningless one?”

It is very easy. It is like a baptism. You just enter the lake and let its waves wash over you and they will drift your soul past those blue horizons and back to your childhood days. There you’ll be able to see all your forgotten dreams and experience true happiness. Of course you’ll also be able to truly see that this sky above is Malawian blue. Ha! Ha! Ha!
12. Realia

THE Malawi Polytechnic Library, a donation from the government of the USA to the good people of Malawi, is a two-floored building at the beginning or the end of the campus depending on which entrance you use.

The ground floor houses, among other things, the library staff offices, the audio/visual unit, the periodicals room, the issue counter and some space containing computer terminals, the reference section, and some tables used by some students/staff for reading. The first floor houses the main collection, the main reading area, and the reserve collection.

It’s raining when he exits the main lecture theatre. Time is exactly 9:30 am, he checks on his watch. He runs across the fifteen yards separating the theatre and the library, shielding himself from the rain with his backpack. He enters the library and, after pulling out a blue folder, a Mass Media Today book, two pens, a magic marker, and a highlighter, deposits the bag where bags are left with an attendant.

He pushes through and stops at the books catalogue drawers. Through the glass he peeks into the periodicals room and what he sees pleases him. Dozens of students are busy scrutinizing every bit of that day’s newspaper. He beams with pride. A final-year journalism student, he is very proud of his programme. As far as he is concerned, it is the only program worth taking at the college. ‘What else can satisfy man’s hunger for knowledge,’ he reasons silently.

“We have a basketball game. Be there.” He turns round. It’s someone from his house, Ndirande A. He is standing on the steps leading to the main collection area, his elbows resting on the sides. A library worker growls at them but is ignored.

“Against who?” He asks.

“Kapeni B. Better be there.” He disappears up the stairs.

He checks into the drawers for any books on communication. He has an important paper on communication theory due in two days. This is what he does with most of his assignments. He waits until the due date is near before doing them. For some unknown reason, his brain works well under pressure. He copies some books and their location. Next he goes to the issue counter where, after producing his ID card, he returns the Mass Media Today book. He branches to the right, passes some people on computer terminals and turns left to the reference section.
With a little effort he finds the book he is looking for: ‘A Journalist’s Guide to Sources’. While bending to retrieve the book, he sees another book that catches his attention. He would have missed it had it not been for its army green jacket and the fact that it is wedged between two identical large ‘Oxford Encyclopaedias to Literature’ that dwarfs it. The one who put it there clearly had the intention of hiding it; a practice so common it actually seems normal.

The book, which has a picture of an M-16 gun on the cover, is simply titled *Terrorism: counter-attacking views*. ‘This should be interesting,’ he thinks to himself. He opens the introduction page and starts reading. The editor of the book stresses the need for people to read opposing ideologies, not only as a key to critical thinking but also as a way of questioning one’s special beliefs. That, in return, will lead to the discovery of the inconsistencies in those ideologies. Right away he likes the book.

He picks the book he came for, his blue folder and the green book, and heads for the main collection. At the end of the stairs he winks at the guy behind the reserve collection counter and the guy winks back, acknowledging a friendship that usually develops after two or more years on campus. Soon after entering the main collection he is loudly greeted by a friend. He answers in an even louder voice. Some first year students are irritated but they can only manage to scowl.

Ten yards later he passes by his roommate. He’s sitting in a cubicle with his girlfriend. He stops to say hey. The roommate’s one hand is pretending to scrawl something on paper while the other hand is lost somewhere inside the girl’s skirt. He gives his roommate an approving wink and moves towards the last but one window at the end of the library. This window will give him a big view to look at when bored with reading. He will be able to watch cars or people passing along the Masauko Chipembere Highway. Or he will simply stare at girls’ cleavages when they pass below. The latter, which requires no boredom to be achieved, is called ‘radar’ as in using radio signals to locate the position of something.

But today he is in no mood for both. There is that pending paper and the green book. He dives into the green book right away. The first essay he reads is by one Bill Clinton, president of the U S of A. He is justifying the bombing of factories in Sudan as a counter action against terrorist attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Clinton is very convincing in the essay. When he finishes he takes a five-minute break to digest the essay.

The next essay he reads is by one Osama bin Laden. It’s an edited interview excerpt with TIME magazine. His first impulse is to ignore it. He thinks he knows what Osama bin Laden stands for. Then the words by the editor come to him, as if from another world. ‘...A way of questioning one’s belief...’
He reads the excerpt. After finishing he can’t believe his eyes. He reads it again and gets the same reaction. It just can’t be, he assures himself. He spends some five minutes trying to convince himself otherwise. He can’t. He reads the excerpt once more and after getting the same reaction, closes the book. His brain, which works well under pressure, is now getting confused. Or so he thinks. Both articles are convincing but which one is the truth? He can’t decide. ‘Maybe both are,’ he thinks. ‘Impossible,’ he corrects himself. ‘The essays are opposites. How can they both be true?’ As far as the journalism he is taught is concerned, where there are two opposing views, one has to be true and one false. But which one, he can’t decide.

Then, like lighting, an idea strikes him. It’s so big an idea and it strikes when his confused brain least expects it. ‘What if?’ He thinks. ‘What if...what if there is no absolute truth. What if? What if all he had been taught is one big lie? What if all those papers he has written are not exactly the truth? What if they are just what his lecturer or whoever was in charge needs to hear? What if? And what are his fellow college students in Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia being taught? What are they writing to their lecturers? Is it the truth or is it simply what they are taught as the truth?’

He needs water and he needs it fast. He gets up and walks ten yards to the fire hose reel. He tries to suck water out of it but can’t. Then he remembers that it is for emergency fire outbreak only. He curses and enters the back door leading to the toilets. To his right are the ladies’ toilets and to his left are the gents. He is about to enter the ladies toilets when an after thought pushes him into the gents. He drinks some water from the tap and looks into the mirror for a reflection of his image. ‘Who are you?’ He whispers. “Really, seriously, who are you?” Directly above him is a fluorescent tube. He looks at it and asks: “Who are you?” It doesn’t answer. It simply shines. He smacks it with his bare hands. It falls to the ground, shattering into tiny pieces.

‘What if?’ The ‘lightning’ is back. He exits the gents and enter the ladies where no one is in. He looks around and, seeing nothing special, he asks: “Why? What’s so special here? Why can’t we just use one toilet?”

‘What if?’

He exits the ladies, past the back door into the main area. He goes for the shelf numbered PE 1137 ARN — PN 4305.R3 GOO and picks the fifth book on it. Literature: Reading fiction, poetry, drama, and the essay. He flips to a page randomly and lands on page 602 where there’s a poem by one Emily Dickinson tilted Tell all the truth but tell it slant. He skips the first verse and reads the second verse:

‘As lightning to the children eased
With explanation kind
The truth must dazzle lightly
Or every man be blind…’

He throws the book down and picks three more at once and throws them down. He goes to the fire hose reel and tries to rip it off the wall. “Hey that’s school property!” Somebody shouts. After five attempts he gives up. He goes back to his table, picks up the blue folder and throws it in the air. It hits the ceiling and comes back down, papers flying all over.

‘I have to get away,’ he thinks. ‘There is no truth. I have to join reality. There’s only reality.’

He starts for the exit, half walking-half running. At the ‘Books awaiting shelving’ a girl he likes winks at him. He doesn’t see her. His roommate shouts something but he can’t hear. He fast descends the stairs, taking three at a time, and exits the library. With no place in mind, he turns to his left and starts running. He enters the rain but doesn’t feel it. Still running he climbs the steps from the library, passes the lawn, jumps over the hedge and joins the Masauko Chipembere Highway. His mind is so focused on trying to find reality so much so that when the minibus hits him and flips him five times in the air and smashes his brain on the tarmac, he scarcely notices it. Still he’s running. He runs and runs and runs.
13. Nostalgia

I am sitting beside a lion statue in the Trafalgar Square, facing what I think is east. Nowadays I’m not sure about anything at all. Never mind the college degrees I got back home. I’m not even sure about myself. Does my existence here have a purpose? Or forget the purpose. That’s asking too much out of life. Do I even exist? No one wants to have any business with me. I’m avoided like a serious disease. Even my fellow tramps avoid me. The only time I’m assured of my existence is when I try to enter one of those fancy places. You know, like a restaurant or an art gallery. Security throws me back into the streets in a blink of an eye.

This is a strange country. It has always been a strange country to me. I should have turned around thirty years ago when I stepped out of the plane and noticed the hazy atmosphere. I should’ve gone back home where the sun shines all year round. Now my mind has become hazy, just like the weather in this country.

No one likes to be alone. No one. To have no one to call your own and no home to go to. That’s the lowest you can sink in life. If I were born here, being a tramp would’ve been quite bearable. But I wasn’t. I was born in a country where families and communities are so close it’s virtually impossible to be on your own. Where old people like me are given the utmost respect, never mind their status in society. But not here.

My terrible eyesight can only go as far as the time printed on the Big Ben. My mind, on the other hand, wants to go further than that. It wants to go home. It can’t. All it can do is recall memories. Memories so far fetched it actually doubts them. A few are real though. In fact they are so real I can swear they were somehow chiselled in my mind. And not a day goes by when I don’t think about these memories. I yearn and cry for these memories. You really have to be in my shoes to truly appreciate the degree of my yearning. You really have to be someone who’s old and sick and dying and far away from home. If there’s another life out there, I’d like to be born where I was before I became dissatisfied.

Someone once said that for whatever you want out of life, look no further than your backyard. If it’s not there, it doesn’t exist. How I wish I had followed that line of thought. How I wish I had looked no further than my backyard called Malawi. This is where all I needed in life was.

When that thief broke into my apartment and store my stuff including the envelope containing my papers, I knew I was in trouble. And I could’ve been in less trouble if I had gone to the authorities right away. The Malawi high Commission maybe. But no. Not that. They would have sent me home. And
home was the last place I wanted to be. I wanted much more than my backyard could offer.

The plan was to work hard, save money, and buy some fake paperwork. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years. Five years later I was sucked right into homelessness.

My Malawi is some country. Strange it has taken me all these year to figure that out. And I want it. I want it all. Just to feel it. To feel the simplicity and originality of the life. The timelessness feeling. The lack of hastiness. The hunger. The poverty. The dry seasons. The wet seasons. The pain. The diseases. The genuine laughter. The cultural practices. The stupidity of the people. The lakes, especially Lake Malawi. The rivers, especially the Shire. The good roads. The bad roads. The November rains when the country plants its maize and the month of April when it harvests. The maize meals. The cassava meals. The stupid politicians. Blantyre. Lilongwe. The lakeshore road. The pompous Indians. The football matches. The moonlight dances. The wedding parades. The festivities. The 6th of July. The 3rd of March. The local music. The monkeys. The elephants. The national parks. The churches. The preachers. The traditional medicine. The upper class homes. The mosquito infested ponds near some homes. The clear leisure parks. I need mother Malawi. All of it. Give me the so-called trash and I’ll gladly receive it.

Big Ben announces 12 noon and I don’t have anything to eat. Two people sitting on top of the lion statue are sharing a sandwich. How do you seat on top of a lion? The truth is most things in this country feel fake to me. The people, the buildings, the life, the weather. Especially the weather. You can’t die in this weather. I don’t want to die in this weather. I don’t want to be buried in this weather. Will they even bury me? Give me Malawi. Give me the tropical weather and I'll gladly sweat. Give me the weather so hot and let me sweat even in my death. Give me Malawi.
14. A tale from Sasani

LOCATED on the outskirts of Nkhota-kota district, Sasani is truly a place to be. At first glance, it seems like just another sleepy Malawian village. From the old clinic standing in the shadows casted by the huge mango tree to the evergreen boundaries with the one and only Nkhota-kota wildlife reserve. As a matter of fact, en route from the reserve you would swear that it is part of the reserve and that no human life exists at all. But take a closer look behind the bushes and the tall trees. There you’ll find houses partially in hiding as if themselves are in doubt of their existence, thus contributing to the mystery that surrounds the village itself. Then all sorts of surprises come to light: rivalries, hopes, dreams and most importantly, tales.

However, since officially no true son or daughter of Sasani will tell you stories concerning his fellow kinsmen, finding tales is like trying to find a smile amongst a group of people fishing around midnight.

Some tales though, do occasionally surface especially if you are a tale monger like myself, willing to buy the teller something to quench his soul. Myself being true to this game, it’s more than temptation that overcomes me to buy the tellers the duty-free intoxicants they desire. Not only are they economical, they are also very strong. Because after a few centilitres or so, the tales are always coming in their large numbers.

Anyway, one tale that came was of the two city slickers who, after having enough of the city and its rat racism, decided to take a breather and experience some jungle-ism. For some unknown reason, they had their sights set on Nkhota-kota Wildlife Reserve. While driving through Sasani to get to the reserve, with their car radio shouting on top of its voice, they came to an unscheduled halt when they clashed into one of the village beasts; the Chief’s cow.

The crowd of villagers that had soon gathered was not amused. Rather, it was bemused. The cow was badly injured and died at the spot while the front of the car was a write off. The man who was the one driving sustained minor injuries while the passenger was harmless, or at least she appeared to be so since she was in a slumber so deep even the accident did nothing to arouse her from it. Whatever she had taken must have been very strong.

Adding much bemusement to the villagers, instead of getting out and talk things over, the man just sat there, talking to himself in a slurred voice.

The Chief and his entourage entered the scene a good ten minutes later, after sending one of the villagers to the police, which is some 6 KM away. Still, the driver was busy talking to himself. Throwing chivalry to the winds, the driver
whispered in a slurred voice, audible enough to be heard by the villagers and the Chief: “Whose goat is anyway?”

This, he said, referring to the dead cow. Now, cows are not goats nor are goats cows. The Chief was not impressed.

Throwing chivalry still further to the winds, the man then slumped over the wheel and fell asleep as if nothing has happened. Who can believe such foolhardy?

Sasani has its fair share of problems including, it seems, a lack of a sense of humour. And true to their nature, they did not find the scene in front of them humorous. Imagine witnessing two elderly people in their slumber. It was apparent that someone’s leg was being pulled here and it sure wasn’t the sleeping couple’s. It was obvious that they were pulling The Chief’s leg. If you ask me, no one likes having his or her leg pulled. Self-respect demands that the leg puller’s leg must be pulled in return before normal relations can start. The Chief, like any other person felt that way. For was not Sasani known for its hospitality. The Chief had to pull their legs only he did not know how plus the couple looked truly stoned.

When two policemen arrived an hour later, the radio was still shouting and the couple were still in their trance. The police intervened and tried to wake them up but to no avail. Eventually, they were carried like two dead bodies into the police car. Since it was already getting dark, The Chief was told to visit the police station first thing in the morning to file his statement.

They left, amid roaring dust, one cop driving the police car that carried the two ‘dead bodies’ and the other driving the now bashed Land Rover. The Chief and his villagers were left to attend the tragedy that had befallen them; the dead cow.

On their way to the BOMA, the couple resumed their slumber party and seemed oblivious to police questioning. Still in their mood, they were thrown into a cell.

Only in the dying hours of the morning, after the return of their sobriety, did the couple realize where they were. To the husband, himself a lawyer, one trained and qualified in the law, to be found on this side of the law was so unheard of. He certainly wasn’t jailed for contempt of court and the village cop responsible for this mess was no judge, by all means. Then casting his mind back to the episode of yesterday, it all came back flooding. He was very mad indeed.

By seven o’clock, The Chief and his five witnesses had arrived to file their claim. The victims were fetched from their cell.
“I’ve come to lay a claim against these two drunkards for killing my cow,” said the claimant. He was grinning from ear to ear, enjoying his brief moment of triumph. His star witnesses could not help but to smile. It was very brief indeed.

“On the same ground,” said the lawyer with a short meaning grin, “I’m also laying a counter claim against you because your cow was on the wrong side of the road.”

“What?” asked The Chief with amusement mingled with anger. “What...What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means just that,” answered the lawyer.

“That is crap!” exclaimed The Chief.

“Crap my foot,” shouted the lawyer, “The rules of walking on the road applies to everything that walks on it. Your cow was on the wrong side.”

“How could you possibly tell, considering the condition you were in yesterday?” asked The Chief sarcastically.

“What condition?” asked the lawyer.

“What condition! You were intoxicated,” said The Chief. “You were so loaded you could hardly speak.”

“You have no proof,” said the man. “Did you try any tests to come to that conclusion? I didn’t think so.”

“I have my word,” said The Chief.

“This is not one of your little villages. Your word isn’t good enough. In matters of this kind, tangible proof is needed.”

That phrase left The Chief speechless with surprise. The man had struck a point. Neither he, The Chief that is, nor the police had any sound proof that the day before, the man had been driving under the influence. He tried to say something, anything to regain his now wounded composure; words failed him. He then tried wearing one of those expressions old folks wear when they want to look as wise as possible but this lawyer wasn’t buying any of it. Finally, he surrendered his whole fate into the hands of the police officer, who was as dumbfounded as he was, if not more.

“Officer!” The Chief pleaded to the policeman. “Do something. The man is wasting our time.”
The officer just shrugged.

“Your time! How about mine?” Shouted the lawyer. “As far as the matter is concerned, your cow is responsible for the calamity. I should be the one claiming the charges not you. Just for the hell of it, why don’t I arraign on your back the damages sustained by my car?” Deep down he knew insurance would take care of it. He certainly was bragging, only he did not show it.

The police officer, hearing the kind of dialogue coming out of the lawyer’s mouth, could not help but to ask: “What are you? A lawyer?”

“One of the best in the whole country,” answered the man.

The Chief shrank back immediately. Hearing about these creatures was one thing but meeting them face-to-face was another. All this was news to him for he had not anticipated this form of counter attack. He had no choice but to dismiss the claim. In his whole life, he had never let a leg pull go unrequited. This was one leg-pull he had to let go unrequited. For that time anyway.

Soon after this, the two city slickers left with their hangovers in tow. They left Nkhota-kota district, with all its laws of the jungle, via Salima heading for the concrete jungles of the city, on their now battered Land Rover. The lawyer, armed with a splitting headache plus the fact that he had spent a stint in a village jail, was in no compromising mood. His wife, sensing the situation could do nothing but to sit back, sulk, and nurse her hangover. A long marvellous holiday, he had promised. Such a long marvellous holiday indeed!

The Chief and his star witnesses left to attend to their businesses. They left the police station shaking their heads in disbelief, while cursing with a passion every soul under the sun unfortunate enough to be called a lawyer.

They were to hear from the same cop, a month later, that the stoned couple did not make it past Salima district. Their car overturned seven times soon after crossing Kamuzu Bridge. The cause of the accident was never established. Fortunately, nobody died, and unfortunately they both sustained major injuries. The folks from Sasani, especially The Chief, liked the part about the lawyer not being able to practice his law skills again. Up to now The Chief considers that one leg still unrequited. Time will tell.
15. Dying in time

The sleek and expensive four-wheel drive screeched to a halt outside the gates of the cottage and honked twice. The owner had the look of someone very pleased with himself. And he had every right to be for all his dreams, it seemed, were coming true.

Jussab, the handy man who run the cottage, came to see who it was. On seeing the car his mouth broke into a big smile.

“Yes Bwana! You’re here Bwana,” he said while opening the gates. He was excited, like a zoo animal when it sees its feeder.

The ‘Bwana’ entered the compound and packed the car. He got out and smelled the air. It smelled of water and fish. He loved the lake. He liked the timelessness feeling he got from it. His wife, on the other hand, didn’t like the lake as much. Many times when he tried to bring her along she refused. This was very fine with him.

“Yes Jussab, I’m here,” he finally said.

“You look good Bwana!” Jussab remarked. “Just like always.”

“Thank you. How are you?”

“Surviving Bwana. Just surviving. I lost a child last month. Malaria.” For a brief moment there was a sad look on Jussab’s face.

“I’m sorry.” He wasn’t.

“It’s ok Bwana. Some things you just can’t question. How is your lovely wife?”

“She very fine. She wants you to catch for her a lot of Chambo. She has lots of mouths to feed you know.”

“What do you mean?” Jussab asked, a frown on his face.

“I mean she has kids who need proteins. She wants you to catch some fish for her.”

“I’ll be happy to,” he answered, the smile back on his face. “Anything for your lovely wife.”

“Thank you.”
“No problem Bwana. The cottage is ready for you. Everything you need is here.”

“Everything?”

“Yes Bwana, everything is here. Everything including her.”

“You mean she’s here?”

“No Bwana but she’s around. I can fetch her for you.”

“Good. Very good indeed,” answered the man while scratching his shaven chin. “Very good.”

“First thing I need,” he continued, “is a quick shower. Then I’ll take a nap until three. Wake me up when it’s three. No! She should wake me up. Tell her to wake me up at 3 pm. Understand?”

“Yes Bwana. I understand Bwana.”

He was awoken at 3 pm by a soft tap on the door. He shifted into a comfortable position, put a smile on his face, and answered the tap.

“Come in darling.”

Jussab entered.

“Jussab?”

“Yes Bwana. It’s me Bwana.”

“Of course I know it’s you, you fool. What are you doing here? I thought I told you to...”

“I know Bwana,” answered Jussab, cutting the man in mid sentence. “I have some bad news Bwana.”

“What bad news?” Asked the man. He was feeling so good with life bad news was the last thing he expected.

“She is sick Bwana. Very sick.”

“Who’s very sick?”

“Maureen.”
“What do you mean she is sick? She can’t be sick. Not today. I’ve waited six months, six long months, for today Jussab. Don’t tell me she is sick.”

“She is sick Bwana. She is.”

“She is sick Bwana. She is sick,” the man said, mimicking Jussab. “Did you see her? I bet you didn’t.”

“No Bwana. I didn’t see her but...”

“But what? You’re supposed to know. She’s your daughter for crying out loud.”

“I know Bwana but she is sick.”

“And how do you know? You didn’t even see her.”

“I didn’t but my wife...”

“Forget your wife. Did you see her?”

“No but my wife...”

“Forget your stupid wife, you stupid fool. Did you see her?”

Jussab did not answer. His face, which was now changing, fell to the ground.

“And how do you know she is even sick? You didn’t even see her.” The man went on.

“I know she is sick Bwana,” Jussab answered, raising his face up to face the man again.

“Poor Jussab! Poor stupid Jussab! Always believing what you are told.”

“But she is sick Bwana. My wife says so and I believe her.”

“Stupid Jussab. Always being lied to. Always being abused.”

“Bwana please stop,” Jussab begged, self pity building up in his eyes. “Please.”

“Always being lied to. Always.”

“Bwana stop,” he begged some more.
“Do you remember what happened ten years ago? Ten years ago when I was building this cottage. Of course you remember. Someone who’s over sixty years of age ought to remember something that happened ten years ago.”

“If you say so Bwana.”

“Say I remember!” The man commanded.

“I remember,” answered Jussab in his ever-timid voice.

“You remember what happened to your daughter, don’t you? Not this one, who’s feigning sickness, but Marita. Do you remember?”

“Of course I remember Bwana. One can never forget such things.”

“Do you remember?”

Jussab didn’t answer.

“Of course you remember,” the man went on. “The reminder is still here. Who did your daughter say was responsible for her pregnancy?”

Still Jussab could not answer.

“Who?” The man thundered.

“Matiyasi Bwana. It was Matiyasi.”

“And was it?”

“Yes Bwana. He said so himself.”

“Matiyasi didn’t say anything. The K5 000 I paid him said he was the father. Are you with me or do I have to translate for you?”

“Please Bwana, talk to me like I’m twice as old as you are.”

“I can’t. You know why? It’s because you’re pathetic.”

“Please Bwana.”

“You’re pathetic. All of you. You, Maureen, Marita, Matiyasi, all of you. I bet you know the feeling of being abused, don’t you Jussab? I bet you know the meaning of abuse. Tell me, what is abuse?”

“Please Bwana. Let’s talk like adults.”
“Talk like adults! Talk like adults? Unbelievable! Are you an adult Jussab? Are you now? You’re sixty-three years old, aren’t you Jussab. Or should I put it the way you village folks say it. You are sixty-three harvests old, aren’t you? Sixty-three and I call you by your first name. And you call yourself an adult.”

Jussab looked down again.

“I’m an adult,” the man went on. “You know why? You call me Bwana every time. I’m an adult. You are pathetic.”

“Please Bwana,” Jussab begged his face still on the ground.

“You are pathetic. All of you. Right now go and take all your pathetic little friends and come here. You should come and crawl right in front of me.”

“Please Bwana.”

“All of you. Damn! Nothing but pathetic creatures. Line up here. You, your wife, your daughters, your grand...”

“Enough!!” Jussab screamed on top of his voice, raising his head and suprising the Bwana in the process. “Enough already. If you don’t stop, I’ll do or say something we’ll both regret.”

“Do what? Say what? And how dare you answer me in that tone? And what can you possibly say that I can regret, Pathetic as you are? Look at you!”

“You think I’m pathetic, B-w-a-n-a? You think I’m pathetic! You of all people!”

“Say whatever you want to say and let’s see if I’ll regret it.”

“I’m pathetic? You’re pathetic! Your whole life is pathetic.”

“Say it!!”

“Ok I’ll say it.”

“Just say it!!”

“How many children do you have? How many?”

“Three. I have three beautiful children. And if you think that’s not enough, think again. Three children by me. Me!”

“Are you sure?”
“Yes I’m sure. You want me to add the creature I gave your daughter? Then it’s four.”

“How come they all don’t look like you?”

“They took after their mother, my wife.” This was a lie and the man knew it.

“I didn’t know your wife looks like me! Ha! That’s a good one.”

“What are you saying Jussab?”

“What are you saying John?”

“You just called me by my first name! You just called me by my first name! Did you just call me by my first name?”

“Of course I did. You really are pathetic. You think after this verbal abuse I’ll be able to work for you again? Ha! You are no longer my employer.”

“Get out of my cottage!”

“Not until I’m done with saying what I have to say. You asked me to say it, didn’t you? You begged me and now I’m saying it. You think you fooled Matiyasi. You think Matiyasi lied to me. He lied to you. You paid him five thousand to claim a child that was his. A child he was more than willing to raise. And where is he? Happily married to Marita, that’s where. And you call them pathetic. Ha!”

“You are fired Jussab.”

“Of course I’m fired. I know that. But do you? You are fired. You are very fired my friend. You are very fired like a bullet from a gun. Your lovely wife! All those seminars she lied to you about. Where do you think she was? Right here in my arms. In that very same bed you abused my daughters. Do you think I was happy seeing my daughters being abused like that? You think I was happy, you infertile creature?”

“Get out now.”

“Of course I’m leaving you loser. You infertile, good-for-nothing loser.”

With that Jussab left, slamming the door behind him.

He stood there for two full minutes without moving. He could not even think. Jussab had stabbed him right in the heart. He had hit Bull’s eye. And he had done a pretty good job too.
He went to the wardrobe mirror to see his own wounded reflection.

‘I’m really pathetic,’ he thought looking into the mirror. ‘I really am pathetic.’

It was all over and he knew it. It was all over. Just like that it was all over. What had taken over thirty years to build was over in what seemed like a flash.

He stepped outside the cottage and smelled the air. He felt nothing but betrayal. The air that had excited his innermost senses smelled of nothing but betrayal. Tears were building in his eyes. It was done. It was all over.

He started walking towards the lake then turned right and started walking the beach. Here and there people mumbled a greeting but he did not respond. He did not even see them or hear them. He was talking to himself in a low voice.

‘I’m a loser. It’s all over. I’ve been lied to.’

He kept moving until he reached the swamp on the far side of the beach. Here he stopped after seeing something move. On closer inspection he saw it was a hippo, busy eating the water plants. Smelling his presence it looked up and felt threatened. What came to its mind is what comes to every hippo’s mind when it feels threatened; to run back into the waters. But the man was standing in its way so it just stood there. The mid-afternoon sun made its oily red skin look like the hippo was sweating blood. It wasn’t. It simply stood there, watching the man.

He started talking to the hippo.


The hippo just stood there watching him. When the man inched forward, it got ready to attack.

“You don’t want to come here. Ok I’ll say it loud. I don’t care who hears because I’m a loser anyway. These plants can hear. I don’t care. I slept with your wife. Did you hear that? Your wife! I slept with your wife. But does it matter? To you maybe but to me it doesn’t matter because this is ending today. You’ll end it for me. This is ending today. And when it’s all over, you’ll tell them I went out like a man. Tell them I went out like a real man.”
He inched forward again. Feeling more threatened the hippo opened its mouth very wide to scare the man back. When the man inched forward again, it had had enough. It started for the waters at a speed of about 20 KM/Hr. Before the man could realize what was going on, it picked him up between its four feet wide mouth and crashed his body into two parts. Then it disappeared back into the waters.

Moments later the villagers found the two body parts. Among them was a very fit-looking Maureen, who was coming from drawing water from the lake. She remarked that he went out like a foolish man. Every man ought to know that you can’t stand between a hippo and water.

Fortunately for her, and unfortunately for the dead man, the hippo was nowhere near to argue her claim.
16. Evanescent ones

He didn’t have an opinion. No. Not even one. But I wasn’t convinced. He said he only wanted to get high. I asked him, once, if that wasn’t an opinion. He said no. Opinions make the world a bad place. Getting high doesn’t make the world a bad place.

When he was high, he said, he felt closer to mother earth. He could feel her breathing and her heart beating. He felt closer to all the elements of life too and he could also feel the rhythm of life. He could touch the bluer skies and swim the deepest seas. Once he swam so deep he felt closer to the four corners of the earth; corners erected by the Head Creator.

Some days, especially Sundays, we’d sit on a big rock that was below a cemetery. He’d start rolling a spliff of ganja, pausing only long enough to say that he only wanted to get high, then finish rolling the spliff and apply saliva to seal it close. Using a match he’d light it and watch its tip glow into a bright red. Then he’d say ‘I don’t have an opinion.’

He’d take two long puffs and wait for some seconds, like he was swallowing the smoke. Then he’d release the smoke in one big gush, some through his nose, cough twice then inhale some air by forcing it through his teeth. Then, barely getting the words out, he’d whisper: “I just want to get high.”

Most of the times I’d sit around amazed, watching the spliff glow while he puffed on it, his eyes turning into a deep red. Sometimes he’d pass it on to me but I always refused. He’d shake his head and say ‘opinions.’ Then he’d laugh.

One Sunday he asked me for an opinion. Slowly pointing upwards, he asked: “Where do you think they are?”

Following his finger to the cemetery I shook my head and answered, “I don’t know. Do you?”

“I don’t have an opinion, remember?”

“Yes,” I answered. “Although I’m not convinced.”

“I don’t,” he said. “But someday my kind will get their way.”

I agreed half-heartedly, nodding for the sake of nodding. He also nodded and continued puffing while meditating on his two sayings and a baobab tree twenty yards away, feeling the rhythm of life and hearing mother earth breath.
That was sometime ago. Nowadays when I do actually think about him, I think that maybe he didn’t have an opinion after all. His day never came. Or at least he never lived to see it. He died in his sleep aged only twenty-three. Maybe his kind, whoever they were, did see their day.

Sometimes I wonder where he is, ‘disopinioned’ as he was.
17. Like coming home

“DON’T you ever wish you could go back sometimes?”

“Go where?”

“I don’t know. Go back somewhere. Change something.”

“Like where? Change what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe change…I don’t know.”

“I don’t know about change. I don’t know. But I’d love to go back. I’d love to relive these past four months.”

“No, not that. Maybe that too. No, not that.”

“Why not?”

“That will be like destroying the very essence of life itself. Whatever we experienced these past four months is special because we can’t experience it again. Maybe you could remember some of it every now and then. You could look at a picture or something. Maybe a building or a road sign will also do sometimes. Or maybe you could spot a pattern on some dress and remember something you wore a certain special night. I guess that’s okay. But going back will be destroying the future.”

“I know. It’s just these past days are some of the best I’ve had in my life. Never knew I had so much passion in me. So much craziness. Didn’t know life could be so uncomplicated in such a complicated way. Such...”

“Sweetheart, you’re not making any sense. That’s an oxymoron.”

“Perhaps. And why not. No words can explain this thing we just had. Maybe only an oxymoron can.”

“Oxymorons can’t explain a damn thing.”

“They are in the dictionary.”

“No wonder! Dictionaries can’t explain anything.”

“They can explain what you are.”

“Which is?”
“An oxymoron.”

“Very funny.”

“I know. I’m funny. But seriously, I never knew I had such passion. Such drive. Such lust.”

“I know you didn’t just say lust.”

“I did. We weren’t going anywhere, were we?”

“No. And that’s the beauty part of it. But that besides my point. My point is don’t you wish?”

“Wish what?”

“Wish on a star.”

“Really? That’s romantic.”

“No. Of course not. Wish you could go back.”

“Where?”

“In the past dummy. You can be pathetic you know.”

“I know. I don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?”

“Your question.”

“My question?”

“About going back. I don’t know the answer. And you have the nerve to call me pathetic.”

“Okay I take it back. I’m the one who’s pathetic.”

“Thank you dear.”

“Whatever. My point is don’t you wish you could go and change it all?”

“Change it all?”

“Maybe not all. Some.”
“Like what?”

“Like the way we are taught to see things. The way we experience each other as people. The way we see and judge each other.”

“Keep going.”

“The way we set these standards and try to achieve them. You know, like a filter. Exactly, it’s like a filter. Some pass and some don’t. Like meeting someone for the first time and seeing them the way you want to see them and not the way they truly are.”

“I guess that’s bad.”

“It is very bad. Like you and me. Do you think your parents would approve?”

“Us. Us or me in particular.”

“See you don’t know.”

“So now it’s my fault.”

“No. My point is you don’t even know. If things were different, if life was filterless, it wouldn’t have mattered.”

“So you saying it matters what they think?”

“Yes!”

“I thought this was my life. I’ve a mind of my own you know.”

“I know you do and it’s a beautiful mind. It truly is. But I also know it’s easy to have a mind of your own when the filter is far away.”

“This is going somewhere, right?”

“Sweetie, everything leads somewhere. Every little thing.”

“I hope it’s not leading to me going far away to some fancy school. I’ve told you I can find a way to stay here.”

“As a matter of fact it’s leading to you. It’s leading to the land of kisses. Consider this talk as foreplay. Serious foreplay.”

“You’re making jokes! I can’t believe you’re making jokes!”
“No I’m being a jerk. I can be a jerk when I’m with you. You bring the jerk out of me. And the joy, and the anger, and the tears. Especially the tears. Anyway, don’t you ever wish?”

“Wish what?”

“Wish you could go back silly. Go back and change things. Maybe even change the whole system.”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

“Sometimes I wish could go and whip all the people that invented and changed things.”

“Hey, that’s not a bad thought. While you’re there, could you do me a favour and whip the Greeks for starting things like school and stuff?”

“I thought it was the Egyptians that invented such things? I read somewhere that Alexander the Greek together with Aristotle plagiarized many things Egyptian.”

“Plagiarized, huh? I like that. So you think you’re smart?”

“I’m more than smart. I’m funny.”

“You’re not funny. I’m just a lousy audience.”

“You’re jealous.”

“Of you? Why in the world?”

“Because I’m funny and smart and good looking.”

“If you’re so smart, why don’t you plan your future for once?”

“The day I’ll plan my future is the day I’ll destroy my life. He who never plans never gets disappointed. That’s mysticism talking to you right there.”

“Mysticism can go to hell and stay there. Speaking of going back and destroying things, you realize the day you will go back and whip Alex…”

“Alex! How cute! Do you think his parents ever called him that?”

“I don’t know. The day you’ll whip him is the day you’ll destroy these past four months.”
“I guess you’re right. Maybe they did us a favour after all.”

“I can’t believe you’re compromising thousands of years with 120 days!”

“Hey, those four months I felt them. Why should I care about years I didn’t experience. Let Alex, wherever he is, worry about them.”

“What are we going to do? About us? About me going away?”

“I don’t know. All I know is I have lived and I’ll continue to do so, with or without you. You should also do the same.”

“What are you saying? Are you saying you don’t love me anymore.”

“Honey I’ll love you always. If fact, I’m saying I love you more. Trying to make you stay here will only prove my selfishness. Letting you go only proves my true love for you. If you love someone, you give them a choice.”

“I’ll be fine, right?”

“If you continue to live. And why are we talking in future terms? Forget you’re leaving. That’s like two days away. Who knows what can happen in two days? Get into the present. Get into the now. Now is now.”

“Oh that’s very smart. Aren’t you the one who was obsessing about the past seconds ago?”

“I said I’m smart, funny, and good looking. I didn’t say I’m perfect. Come here and let me kiss your neck.”

“Make me.”

“Perhaps you’ve forgotten how good it feels.”

“Now who’s back in the past again?”

“Aren’t you the smart one?”

“Smart, funny, good looking, and perfect.”

“That’s plagiarizing. What are you, Alexander?”

“No. I’m the woman with lips that taste like honey.” “Still plagiarizing.”

“Yeah?”
“Yeah.”

“How about I’m the woman who sees the angel in you?”

“It sounds familiar but it’s okay.”

“That’s because I’ve said it to you countless times.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”
WHEN she arrived the big hall was already full and the session had began. The veranda was also full so she was forced to sit under some tree on the lawn, some meters from the entrance. From there she could hear the voice clearly, thanks to the speakers mounted outside the hall. In fact, the speakers were so loud she wondered about their purpose. Was it for the people outside or was it for everyone within a hundred meters from the premises?

‘Was it the one,’ she wondered. ‘Was the voice the one?’

She needed somebody to save her. It was that simple. Somebody to show her the right way. She had travelled so many miles. She had listened to so many voices and so many sermons. So many preachers had preached to her but they couldn’t get through. She took out a notebook to scribble things.

“You know why monkeys gather in groups?”

When the question was asked, everything went dead; everything including the loud voice of the preacher. She thought she was hallucinating or dreaming or both. She shook her head and rubbed her eyes. It was only when the question was asked again and she saw the one who asked it that she knew she was experiencing neither. She didn’t know. She didn’t even know monkeys gather in groups.

“No, why?”

“For protection. Never seen so many monkeys in my life.”

“Did you say monkeys? Where?”

“Here. This has to be a record.”

She looked around and seeing no monkeys, she dismissed her neighbour as a mad person.

“See how easy it is to dismiss the truth. All you have to do is look the other way or stop thinking altogether. No wonder you’re still searching.”

“Who are you and what do you want?”

“Who I am and what I want isn’t important. What’s important, Maria, is what you want.”

“How did you know my name? Who are you?”
“See you’re not listening. What is important is what you want. The rest are mere details.”

“And what is it that I want? Since you are so smart?”

“How should I know? I’m not you.”

“Are you trying to confuse me? I’ve travelled far for this you know.”

“I know.”

“How do you know?”

“Once again, the rest are mere details. What do you want?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know what you want. I don’t even know what I want. You know why? I already have what I want. So I don’t know what I want. Ha! Bet you never saw that one coming. For a moment you were quite happy. You thought we were one. Two lost souls searching for something. I have news for you. This is not about us. It’s about you. What do you want?”

“I don’t know.”

“Wrong answer. You are here searching. You must know what you want. What do you want?”

“I know I want something. I just can’t say it.”

“Now we are getting somewhere.”

“Why don’t you tell me what I want? It seems to me like you know.”

“Believe me I don’t. I know that you’ve travelled far and wide searching. I know you’ve had nightmares, you’ve had sleepless nights, and you’ve spent a lot of money and time searching. All this I know. But what I don’t know and what I can’t tell you is what you want. That’s for you to decide.”

“How did you know what you wanted?”

“This is not about me. Besides we are both different products. We come from different worlds.”

“I want to feel it.”
“Feel what?”

“What I want. I want to feel it. And I want it to fill all of me.”

“And you actually think it exists somewhere?”

“It has to otherwise why do I feel so incomplete?”

“Talked like a real monkey!”

“What do you mean? And what’s all this monkey business?”

“This is not monkey business. Monkey business deals with dishonesty. This is much more. This is deep.”

“What is it then?”

“It has to do with you.”

“I think we’ve already established that.”

“It has to do with you acting like a monkey.”

“How does a monkey act?”

“Like it knows better.”

“I don’t follow.”

“The monkey only knows. It doesn’t know any better.”

“So in other words I act like I know better when in reality I only know.”

“No. You act like you know when in reality you don’t. Unless...”

“Are you messing with me? You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“Unless what?”

“Unless what?”

“In your last sentence you said ‘unless’.”

“I said ‘who wouldn’t?’”
“Before that you said unless. I cut you off.”

“Oh! Unless you can transcend.”

“Transcend what?”

“Transcend yourself. Go beyond yourself.”

“Well what?”

“Then you’ll know better without actually knowing better.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll finally realize that you’ll never know.”

“Know what?”

“What you are searching for.”

“Well what?”

“Then you’ll simply stop. You’ll stop trying to know. You’ll stop looking up to people to tell you what you want to know. All they are going to tell you are just words. Nothing more. What you are looking for is far much bigger. It can’t be contained in words. It can’t be conceptualised.”

“What do you suggest?”

“I’m not suggesting anything. Open your eyes and you will feel it. Just don’t expect someone to show it to you.”

“Then there’s no point for me hanging here, is there?”

“What do you think?”

“I think there isn’t.”

“Then leave.”

“Are you coming?”

“No. This is fun. I have never seen so many monkeys gathered at one place. This is a record. A record I’m telling you!”
19. Words etc (The return to innocence)

‘BY Cape Maclear standards the day is quite normal,’ says Peter in his funny English. English not learned in school but by speaking to too many Caucasians. Peter looks fourteen but he claims to be over twenty-one with three mouths to feed. Right now he’s trying to convince two American backpackers to take a trip on his boat to Thumbi West Island, about ten minutes away, where they can catch fish with their bare hands. So far the ladies are not buying that.

Time is around 5 P.M but the sun is yet to start showing signs of disappearing. The waters of Lake Malawi are beautiful and calm except near the beach where they keep splashing every now and then. Two Caucasian ladies in identical blue and white swimsuits are stretched on the beach, their legs partly submerged in water, watching nothing in particular. Two other Caucasian ladies and a man are playing freesbie in the water together with the local kids. By the looks of it, they are having a very good time.

I’m sitting on a barstool at a cottage called Emmanuel’s, sipping a beer and trying very hard not to think about the mess I have left home. Looking at what’s happening around me, and there’s so much of it, seems to be helping. I’m surrounded with so much positiveness. The bartender is a young lady and, for a moment, I’m tempted to ask her age. I let it go because the last thing I want to do is play God. Not today and not with the mess back home. Besides, everyone seems to be minding their own business.

Directly behind me two Caucasian men playing Bawo are busy conversing in English and Afrikaans. Behind them, just outside the bar, a local in dreadlocks is trying to sell assorted bracelets to three Caucasian ladies and two African men. They already have enough, he’s told. Instead of leaving, he sits down and joins in their chitchat. Soon a spliff of cannabis is lit and they are all laughing like old friends. I shake my head.

Peter has finally convinced the two Americans. They head towards where his boat is anchored. Suddenly the place feels deserted. I look behind and the two ‘South Africans’ have vanished somewhere. The voice of Beres Hammond, a reggae artist, is coming from the speakers hidden somewhere. He is questioning the merit of the system we live in. I smile and ask the bartender to increase the volume.

‘No I never can understand it
The way the system planned
There’s no hope, no chance, no loophole
No escape for a sufferer man...’
“What kind of trash music is this? Put some real music. Put some kwasa kwasa.” It’s an aggressive looking gentleman who’s out to impress the lady he’s with.

“It’s been a long ride and I’m very tired. Give me a gin and tonic and give the lady a coke. And put some real music!” He barks at the bartender who, in turn, looks at me. I nod. She fumbles behind the counter for what I presume to be a kwasa kwasa tape. I gulp down my remaining beer, slide a K100 note across the counter and leave. Beres Hammond thinks there’s an overnight scheme working just to put him down. I smile and leave just in time to hear a French kwasa kwasa song replace him.

Minutes later I’m combing the beach, with nowhere to go in mind. I feel good. Time feels like it isn’t moving at all. The way it felt when I was young. If it weren’t for the mess at home. I walk the beach.

“Give me K10.”

I turn around. It’s a boy of about ten.

“Why?”

“Because I’m hungry.”

“Hungry? Why don’t you fish? Everybody fishes around here.”

“Yes but I don’t have a hook. Why don’t you give me some money and I’ll buy a hook?”

I’m not a communist but it sounds like a fair deal.

“How much is a hook?”

“K5.”

“I’ll give you K20 for four hooks.”

I dig in my pocket and produce a K200 note. It’s the only money I have. I look back to where my cottage is. It’s a little far.

“Let’s walk. We might be able to break this money.”

“Do you have any laundry that needs to be washed?” he asks after some yards.

“No.”

We walk.
“How about some fine bracelets Bwana?” says a male voice.

“No thanks. I already have some.” I answer without looking.

“No you don’t.

I stop and turn around. It’s the dread locked guy who was smoking and chatting with the tourists some few minutes ago.

“And how do you know?”

“I know. This your child? You look alike.”

“No. This is not my child.” I answer my voice slightly losing its edge.

“You don’t have to get angry. He’s also a child of the earth. Like you and me.”

“I’m not angry.”

“Yes you are.”

I’m about to tell him to go to hell but he ignores me and turns to the kid.

“What do you want child?”

“He wants to give me some money to buy fish hooks.”

“How much?”

“K20.”

“Here.” He gives the kid a K20 note and the kid runs away. He watches the kid go and he smiles, revealing snow-white teeth.

“Am I supposed to thank you?”

“For what?”

“For that,” I point at the kid, who’s getting smaller and smaller.

“So he’s your child after all. I knew it!” He exclaims, beating the air with his clenched fist.

“He’s not my child,” I say, my teeth clenched.
“Easy now. Do you know how many muscles it takes the body to produce that look? Stop abusing your body. Smile so your face can shine like the lake. Look!” He points.

To my own amazement I’m following his finger. I see nothing but the waters making noise.

“What do you mean?” I ask him.

He points to the far west of the lake where the now setting sun looks like it’s being swallowed by the lake. This creates a beautiful yellow line across the lake all the way to where I’m standing.

“You see?”

“I see,” I lie.

“No you don’t but it doesn’t really matter.”

I take a long hard look at him. There’s something about him I’m trying to figure out. I can’t. This is very surprising considering that I’ve spent over thirty years of my adult life arguing cases in front of juries. Up until now I considered myself someone who could study people quite well. He has a way of talking to a person like they are a child. I’m 60 and he couldn’t be more than 30 yet I’m forced to listen to whatever he’s saying. Right now he’s talking about the beauty of the lake and how Malawians don’t treasure that beauty. I’m still trying to figure him out but I’m failing.

“Why are you here anyway? It’s clear you’re not here to admire the lake.”

“How do you know?”

“You’re here but your mind is far away. Plus there’s a burden in your eyes the size of a log.”

I want to say something but words are failing me. I want to belittle him but I can’t. He notices this and he says:

“It’s okay. You can tell it to me.”

He takes my hand into his and something moves throughout my body. Hand in hand we walk for a few yards. Then he says:

“Let it out. Whatever it is, it can’t be that bad.”

I pause for a moment. Then I tell him.
“I had a huge nervous breakdown. I thrashed the whole of my office from wall to wall. After that I went home and broke everything breakable. It’s a good thing my wife divorced me. I would have broken her too. I’m sick of this pathetic game. Sick of it all. Why? What’s the whole purpose? What’s it all about?”

“In any case, I wouldn’t know. Sometimes a nervous breakdown can be a good thing to have. It clears your mind and sets you free. If you’re lucky, you get another chance to start all over. What happened?”

“For what seemed like a millionth time, I won a case where my client was as guilty as hell. The voice inside me couldn’t take it anymore. I think it got tired of reminding me of what’s wrong and what’s right. Then I lost it. The next thing I knew, I was breaking everything breakable and cursing anyone within my sight.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m quitting for sure.”

“And do what?”

“Maybe I’ll come and settle down here. Like you said, start all over. Start life afresh you know. Maybe I’ll start selling bracelets like someone I know.”

“Selling bracelets isn’t as easy as it seems, you know. Some of these tourists have an attitude problem.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.” We both laugh.

We walk some few yards and he says:

“There has to be a purpose. Look at this lake. Don’t tell me this exists for nothing. Maybe for you it’s either a matter of searching or of stopping searching. Either way, it’s all up to you. Look at that?” He points to a toddler who’s trying to walk without much success. The mother is laughing her lungs out. “Don’t tell me that has no purpose. Search or stop searching. Just make sure that whatever you do feels right. You are a good man. Search inside or stop searching and you’ll find the right answer.”

Then he vanishes. Just like that, he vanishes.

It occurs to me right there that not only is he the voice that snapped inside me, but he is also my guardian angel. This may be hard to understand or believe to
some but it's true. Sometimes you have to believe in the improbable to be redeemed. I start back for my cottage, searching my soul for the right thing to do. Life feels free again. It feels good.

“How about a trip to the island Bwana? You will catch fish with your bare hands.”

“Yeah. How about a trip to the island.”
20. Words etc (It’s in the moment)

I HAVE always tried to make sense of things, especially those that seem to trouble my thoughts. The ones that nag at me all the time.

The elder who was supposed to help me explain such things was not of much help. In fact he was of no help at all. Chewed on his sugarcane, he simply did. And the more I nagged at him, it seemed, the more he chewed on it. They weren’t hard questions. In fact they were simple questions. They had to be, especially to him. And it wasn’t my fault that I went to him. It wasn’t my fault that he sat there looking as smart as possible. Age and reason, I think, makes you do that. Makes you sit down there and look as smart and stable as the hills themselves. That he was an elder was not my fault. Most people I know don’t survive this here earth at all. They leave at around twenty-five or thirty. Some go up to forty. Few daring ones reach fifty. It’s a good thing too, leaving early. I think. There isn’t much we are doing out here. We woke up each morning and do the things we’d rather not be doing. But we do them anyway. Leaving early must not be such a bad idea.

And that boy. That boy wasn’t supposed to help me but he helped all the same. Helped me in a very big way. By throwing stones at mangoes and hitting ten in a row, that boy helped me. Throwing and hitting against all probable odds he helped me.

“Why can’t you leave me alone? I’m old,” shouted the old man when I approached him with my questions. “I’m very very old. They took slaves when I was young you know. Took them all and left the few of us behind. No mothers, just young girls to take care of us. I have seen some strange things in my life. Strange things that come to nag at you throughout your whole life. They come knocking even in your sweet dreams. That’s very old. All I want to do is chew my sugarcane and wait for death to come take me. Don’t you have anything to do but trouble old men waiting for death?”

“Old man.”

“What?”

“It’s just you. There aren’t many of you out here you know. The ones who were born when they took slaves. Why do you look so wise? I would have passed you by very easily. Passed you by easily the way I did pass that pot of money yesterday. I would have stopped for that money too had it not been it was in a cooking pot. I’m sick and tired of games, you know. My former boss had plenty of them. I’m sick of jokes.”
“The same here. I’m sick and tired. Sick and tired of life, of you, of your questions, of the nightmares that come knocking in my dreams. Sick of it all. Don’t you have anything to do?”

“No. Besides I’m being nagged. I’m being nagged all day.”

“By who?”

“I don’t know. It could be you, sitting there all day looking smart.”

“Are you being funny?”

“Depends. Sitting there and doing nothing but look smart.”

“I’m not doing nothing. I’m waiting for death to come and take me. You’re the one who’s doing nothing.”

“To you I may be doing nothing but something is being done to me. I’m being nagged.”

“Will you cut out the nagging shit you fool. I’m trying to die here.”

“There you go with the dying crap. And why did you wait this long anyway? Maybe death, whoever the bastard is, gave up on you. Have you ever thought of that? Maybe you’re stuck here until whenever. Maybe until the ones who took slaves come again.”

“That’s a scary thought. Do you have any idea of what you’re talking about? Don’t you have any manners? Don’t you have any respects for elders?”

“There aren’t many of you, you know. You are the second one I know. The first one got wasted with work. Yes, just like that he got weighed by work. Lucky for him the spirits were there to provide some kind of temporary solace.”

“The gods you mean?”

“No. The spirits some people drink to waste themselves. The downside is that the solace is only temporary so you have to continuously drink them.”

“What happened to him?”

“The spirits renewed him and now he sits under a tree, looking as foolish as possible. Something you’re incapable of doing. Maybe you should try them. Yes, you should try the spirits! Then I wouldn’t bother with you. Sitting down and looking as wise as possible.”
“They kill you know.”

“I thought you are looking for death. You don’t really know this death, do you? If he came today to take you, you wouldn’t recognise him would you?”

“Well…”

“And to sit there and look very smart. To sit there and waste my time.”

“I didn’t tell you I’m smart. You assumed I’m smart. I’m not smart. I don’t want to be smart. I want death to come take me.”

“Maybe he was right, you know.”

“Who?”

“The one who took solace in spirits. Maybe he was right. You know what he said?”

“No. What did he say?”

“He said the trouble with being old is that people assume you’re wise when in truth you’re the same fool you have always been, only older.”

“He might have been talking about you. Talking about you.”

“What? I’m twenty five years old!”

“In future terms. He was talking in future terms.”

“Very funny. Maybe he was talking about you?”

“Where are your manners boy. I’m old you know. They took slaves….”

“Yes. Yes. What are we going to do?”

“What do you mean we? Are we a team now?”

“Yes. Seeing that you’re as confused as I am, a team is not such a bad idea.”

“I’m old, you are young. Don’t you want to live? Live. Do something. Teach someone something. Make love to someone. Break a heart. Make a baby. Help someone. Go bother someone. I don’t want to be in a team with you.”

“And then what? I have tried all of that. I’ve lived. For twenty-five years I have lived. I’ve made love to some ladies. Made love to them with a passion that
took only seconds to build and seconds to disappear. Where’s the worth in that?”

“I don’t know. I know nothing. I just want to die. Will please leave me alone!”

At this I shook my head and spat. He went back to being quite and looking as smart as is earthly possible. I left him.

“I have to be the best shot in all the country,” the boy shouted when I passed him.

“Like that matters.”

“It does matter. What are you good at? I’m sensing some jealous from your part. What is it you’re good at?”

“I’m not sure but whatever it is, it’s better that picking mangoes.”

“See you’re jealous. Your vision is impaired, distorted. You have to open your eyes and see the art in the picking. Forget the mangoes. Focus on the picking. I can hit ten in a row. Ten in a row! That, my friend, is a talent. Ten in a row!”

“What are you going to do with all these mangoes anyway? You going to eat them all.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? You’d like me waste all these mangoes, wouldn’t you? What is it with grown ups and fear? You’re scared of my talent. Scared of my perfect talent. Why? You want me to waste these mangoes. That, somehow, will compromise the fact that I’m good at throwing. That, in turn, will make you feel good. My failure will make you feel good. Don’t you see something wrong in that?”

“My young friend, you don’t have a talent.”

“And do you?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe. Unbelievable!”

“Why are you doing it anyway?”

“Why not?”

“Well, I don’t think you can afford to eat all these mangoes.”
“Who said anything about eating these mangoes? I don’t like mangoes. I can’t eat more than one. One suffices as far as I’m concerned.”

“Then why do you pick more than one.”

“You’re impossible. Talking to you is impossible. Focus on the talent. The talent!”

“This is not a talent!”

“Okay. Let me put it this way. You know what scares me? Darkness scares me.”

“Really!”

“No! See now you are happy. You’re excited. When I’m down, when I’m in trouble, you’re happy. My friend, sorry to tell you this but you will never be able to experience true living. You’ll never feel life the way it’s meant to be felt. Where are you going anyway?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you were going somewhere before you stopped here. Where?”

“I’m searching.”

“For what? A talent? Ha! Ha!”

“Very funny. No.”

“What then?”

“Like you can help me. You’re what, eight years old?”

“Ten and yes I can help you. I’m not the one who’s out searching. What are you searching for?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yet you’re searching. That actually makes sense to you?”

“For meaning. I’m searching for meaning.”

“What meaning?”

“Meaning for all this.”
“What?”

“What?”

“What?”

“Meaning of life. Meaning for living.”

“Meaning of life. Meaning for living.”

“Meaning of life. Meaning for living.”

“Maybe there’s no meaning. Did it ever occur to you? I can shoot ten mangoes in a row. It’s something I can do. Why does there have to be meaning in that?”

“Maybe there’s no meaning. Did it ever occur to you? I can shoot ten mangoes in a row. It’s something I can do. Why does there have to be meaning in that?”

“Maybe there’s no meaning. Did it ever occur to you? I can shoot ten mangoes in a row. It’s something I can do. Why does there have to be meaning in that?”

“Well this is much much more than you. This is big.”

“Well this is much much more than you. This is big.”

“Well this is much much more than you. This is big.”

“This is not big. This is senseless. Why search for something you don’t know. How will you know when you find it?”

“This is not big. This is senseless. Why search for something you don’t know. How will you know when you find it?”

“This is not big. This is senseless. Why search for something you don’t know. How will you know when you find it?”

“I’ll know.”

“I’ll know.”

“I’ll know.”

“How?”

“How?”

“How?”

“I will feel good. I will feel content.”

“I will feel good. I will feel content.”

“I will feel good. I will feel content.”

“Like me. Maybe you were searching for me.”

“Like me. Maybe you were searching for me.”

“Like me. Maybe you were searching for me.”

“Not you. There are things that are bigger than you, you know. Bigger than an eight-year old picking mango.”

“Not you. There are things that are bigger than you, you know. Bigger than an eight-year old picking mango.”

“Not you. There are things that are bigger than you, you know. Bigger than an eight-year old picking mango.”

“Ten years. Things like what?”

“Ten years. Things like what?”

“Ten years. Things like what?”

“Poverty, death, AIDS.”

“Poverty, death, AIDS.”

“Poverty, death, AIDS.”

“So you’re searching for poverty, death, AIDS? That’s easy...”

“So you’re searching for poverty, death, AIDS? That’s easy...”

“So you’re searching for poverty, death, AIDS? That’s easy...”

“No!”

“No!”

“No!”

“You’re having problems with poverty, death, AIDS?”

“You’re having problems with poverty, death, AIDS?”

“You’re having problems with poverty, death, AIDS?”

“Yes. That and other things.”

“Yes. That and other things.”

“Yes. That and other things.”

“Like what?”

“Like what?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Like why they happen.”

“I don’t know. Like why they happen.”

“I don’t know. Like why they happen.”

“You like asking questions. That is your problem. Maybe you’re asking the wrong questions.”

“You like asking questions. That is your problem. Maybe you’re asking the wrong questions.”

“You like asking questions. That is your problem. Maybe you’re asking the wrong questions.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe instead of asking others why there’s poverty, why people are dying, or why there’s AIDS, you should be asking yourself what you can do to help. For all
you know, these things might be happening because of you. It could be your own fault. Besides, they are already here so what’s the use of trying to make sense of them? Just face them for everything is in the moment. It’s all in the moment. Life doesn’t happen in the past or the future. It takes place in the moment. The present moment. And it’s your moment. Only you can experience it. Stop looking for assurance in others.

“Who says I’m looking for assu...”

“You’re searching, are you not?”

“Yes, but...”

“No buts. Open your eyes. The answers are right there with you.”

“Still...”

“No still or buts. Just stop. Stop searching and open your eyes. Better yet, why don’t you help me carry these mangoes. The ladies at the market are waiting for me you know.”

“What ladies?”

“The ladies who sell these mangoes. They run an orphanage and selling mangoes is one way of raising money for us orphans.”

“You’re an orphan?”

“Not only that but an HIV positive one. When I was born the doctors gave me three years maximum. Ten years later I’m still going. I’m telling you, shooting ten in a row has got to be a talent!”

“Okaaaay. Now I see.”

“Now you see?”

“Yes! Yes! Now I see.”

“So now you see. Maybe I can teach you.”

“I’d like that.”
Glossary

One more flute song:

Cape Town apples: Apples grown in Cape Town in South Africa.

Bared Souls:

Mount Mulanje: The tallest mountain in Malawi, slightly over 3000m high.

Lawyers in Heaven:

Bawo: A board game common in east and central Africa.

Malawian Blue

Lake Malawi: A fresh water lake in Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania. The main tourist attraction in Malawi, it contains more fish species than any other lake in the world.

Realia

Malawi Polytechnic: A constituent college of the University of Malawi, it is located in Blantyre, the commercial city of Malawi.

A tale from Sasani

Nkhota-kota: A district in central Malawi.

BOMA: British Overseas Military Administration: With origins in the colonial era, this is where administrative offices are located in districts. Also informally referred to as Towns.

Dying in Time

Bwana: Swahili or Chichewa (Malawi’s lingua franca) for Boss.

Words etc (The return to innocence)

Cape Maclear: Famed for its sandy beaches, it’s an popular tourist destination in Malawi. It is located in the south in a district called Mangochi.
Personal acknowledgements

Many thanks to Jesus Christ for being such an inspiration (and for the talent - my other book made me some cash...)

To my mom for the freedom. It means a lot. Hopefully, someone will be touched by my ‘being’.

To Primrose, my sister/lover/friend. Where do I start? That dream about us and a farm...maybe tomorrow.

To Shemu Joyah, my mentor. Reading your work as a student can never compare to these intellectual intercourses. You are IT, my friend. A rare specie.

To Luyando, the 9th world wonder. A time of my life (yours too, I hope). A toast to Nathan.

To Tiwonge, a true friend. A toast to a life that’s awaiting your return.

To Noel, my big brother. Even in your silence, you still amaze. I learnt a lot from those afternoon walks in ‘89.

To Olivia. Thanks for making momma proud. Your future is so bright it is actually blinding me (to steal from Oprah).

To Martin, evanescent ones are you and you are an evanescent one.

To Alice and Tupo. Remember those lazy days at Maky’s?

To Blessings, my number one fan. Here are some more stories you so cherish.

To Yiwonda, here’s hoping you like the new title. I hereby pronounce you Portrait Malawi’s Editorial Consultant for life.

To Levi, if only you could get over the fear. A prayer for Zimbabwe...you will have it good again man. You wait and see.

To Muthi, Chiwoza, Majiga, Martin Josiah, Chipiliro, Chris, Jess, Peter, Wananchi, Mildred, Clarence, Jack, Kondwani, Mwai, Miso, Nadine, Wandumi, Otuli, Ethel, Mercy, and others. Good people. You taught me so much.

Lastly, to you the reader. Here’s hoping you learn something from these simple stories. Whatever you learn, no matter how small, be sure to pass it on. Immortality is achieved through sharing. If you find a mistake, just fix it in your head. Life is simple. Don’t complicate it. Here is to life.
I was given the name Michael when I made my entrance into this earth. Yes, Michael as in the archangel who’s supposed to fight the last war and free mankind (according to the Bible). Not this Michael. This Michael was simply born to try and make sense of it all, maybe even fight it all using words. I know that sounds useless. Truth be known, it probably is. But we try anyway, don’t we? Apparently, the tragedy lies not in losing the battle itself but in not trying.

This book, written between the year 2000 and 2004 before it (unceremoniously) got dumped somewhere, represents the thing that truly moves me: Life (or art). I love life (or art). In essence, words are an art, art is life and life is art so there’s only one thing that truly moves me. Art. Or life. Maybe both, whereby both (one word) shall imply that art and life are one. I love art. Why do I love art? Well, I look at it this way: everyone is busy lying their way through life. Only the artist is lying in a nice and beautiful way. Plus, life or art keeps me sane (or insane, depending on which side of the fence you’re standing). And I’m so drunk on it.

Drunk, drunk, drunk...

This book is a journey. A birth, death, rebirth, and final death journey. A journey of one being born in a third world country. Of one seeing all the mess and then wondering one’s place in that mess. Most importantly, it’s a journey from asking a lot of questions to simply just doing. Like that catholic priest from South America who wrote something like “I’m tired of waiting, I’m the awaited” before picking up a gun to fight injustice.

I love life. All of it. The emptiness, the fullness, the rhythms, the noises, the women pounding, the minibus touts, the birds in the morning, the joys of wedding, the cries of mourning, the songs on the radio, the sounds of love making, the footsteps of people leaving for work at 5 am, the politicians on those podiums, the struggle, the places, the churches, etc. This beat, simply put, is amazing.

You’re probably wondering: what are you talking about, really? I’m talking about seeing life my way (bohemian motion). I’m trying to tell you that in my bohemian motion, life is not as bad as it seems. In fact, it is amazing. The trick is that one has got to learn to take it all in, both the good and the bad. It’s only then that it truly balances; it truly makes sense. It’s only then that one can accept their responsibility.

This is what I am trying to share this with you in this book. Thank you.
About the author

Mtisunge Michael Phoya was born (1980), raised, and will probably die in Malawi, a small country in Southern/Central Africa. He has also written ‘Walks of life: The other side of Malawi’, a ‘journal’ on the many travels he did in Malawi. Currently, he runs Portrait Malawi, a project that promotes contemporary Malawian arts and culture.
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