

WRITE TO LIFE



Issue 5

STRANGE WEATHER

**FREEDOM
FROM** EMPOWERING
SURVIVORS.
REBUILDING
LIVES
TORTURE



Published by Freedom from Torture
Collages by the writers and mentors



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An Introduction to Strange Weather

Issue 5, September 2023

It wasn't easy to think of a title for this anthology. Unlike other years when we've had particular occasions or events to write for, the work here is a collection of pieces from many workshops and several projects. There are pieces on language, on voices found and lost, from our performances at Kings Place and the Bloomsbury Theatre. There is work on Compassion, from this year's Refugee Week theme. But there are also pieces about hopes lost and found, about childhood and old age, about the beauty of nature and the many joys of reading. And there are two very different pieces about the false promise of stuff.

But while we have been writing and performing this work, the weather has become progressively more bizarre, unpredictable and challenging. The literal weather around us, and around the world: the metaphorical weather for any migrant or asylum seeker, any refugee from a life made unbearable by the brutality of governments or others, trying to find a safe home here, a place to start again, that will not turn them away or turf them out.

And the theme that recurs through much of this writing is the thing that everybody needs, everybody longs for, and everybody deserves; that can be found in a passionate romance or a long marriage, in childhood or in a therapy room, and that brings us together here in Isledon Road in stifling summers and freezing, dank winters: the real, enduring power of attention and love.





YESTERDAY

by Marsha

Suddenly my eyes
Started following the odd old fellow retro-walking
Across busy Catharine Street, leading to Covent Garden.
It was a late Sunday afternoon.

The same moment, somewhere else
It might be daylight or dark outside
The almost-born refused to announce its arrival.
Instead
Disappeared halfway through, inside the bloody womb.

Elsewhere, a young soldier
Opened her eye and lost focus on the oblivious target.
Then restored the copper bullet
To her chest strap.

In those brief minutes
You forgot to push the needle
Into your pale puffed arm.
Yet your eyes couldn't shake off
The heavy curtain of nothingness.

On the other side of the world's
Somewhere unnamed
Swollen clouds had second thoughts
And rain drops failed to meet the earth.



TIME

by Nalougo

In the midst of the succession of events and phenomena
inaccurate chronometer, which deceives us

We can neither see it, nor smell it, nor touch it
neither direct nor modify it

It runs and leaves us no reprieve
no right of appeal

It flees like a bird in the night
flows through our fingers like liquid

Assassin, it kills each successive day
It goes too fast
It's like money
when we give it to one place, we can't give it to another

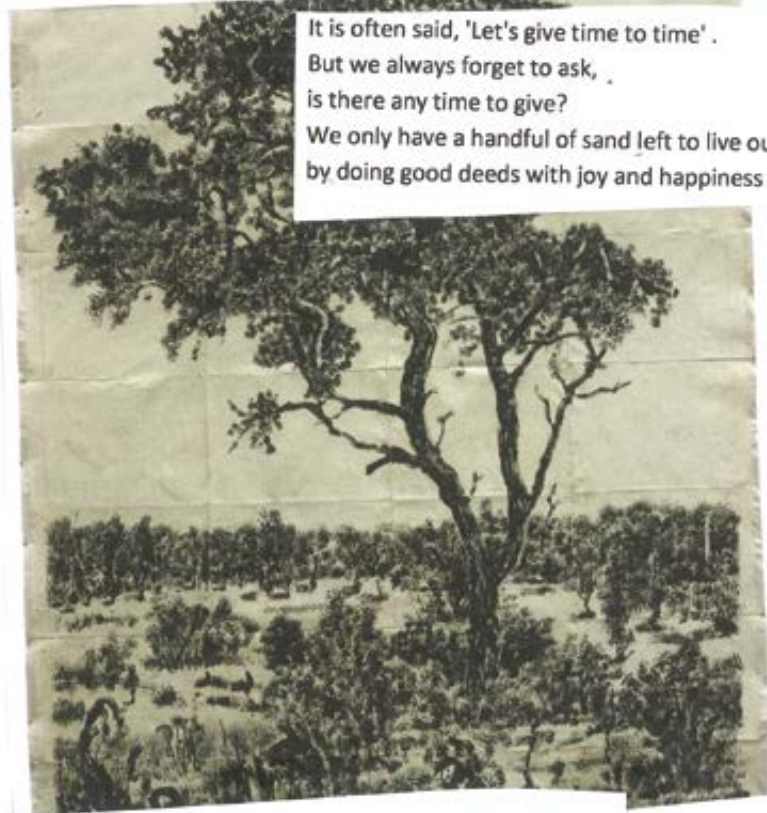
But it gives us one advantage: the privilege of age



With it,
happiness comes by
love takes root
knowledge grows
wisdom is acquired
with the passage of time



It is often said, 'Let's give time to time'.
But we always forget to ask,
is there any time to give?
We only have a handful of sand left to live our life
by doing good deeds with joy and happiness



So, let's take advantage of the time that has been gifted us
Marvel at the world around us
before life catches up with us, and fills us with regret



WHEN I GREW UP

By Tracy

When I grew up, I had three tongues

The first tongue was the Malawi language, Tumbuka.

It said *'Mulimakola'*, 'Hello!' on the day I was born.

This tongue has some authority.

Like the Home Office, it demands one answer,
between *ziwonadi* and *iyayi*, a 'Yes' or a 'No'.

My first tongue
gets straight to the point,
stressing it
and causing stress.



My second tongue
my mother tongue

has a tune and a rhythm all its own

When I cooked well, my mother's tongue would say,
"Tayamika waita Makola chomene"

and then fall silent, as it worked with the teeth on its other job.

But when I added too much salt, it would address me in a different tone:

"Tunyesi Yamika ndochii-ichi!"

I recall this tongue

How it would address me

to depress me

and express all too clearly
what I'd done wrong.



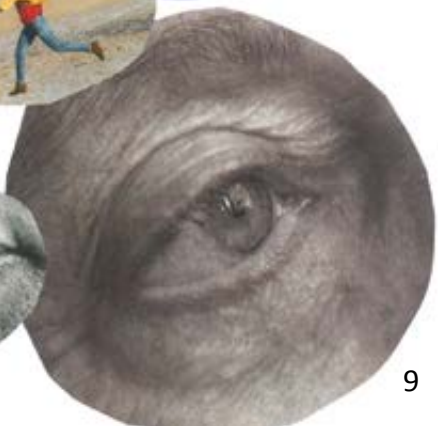
When I went to kindergarten, I grew a new tongue.
With this tongue I was able to travel
away from my mother country
for my electrical engineering degree.


When I left the country
where I had three tongues to command
they all fell silent.

I felt empty, like an empty drum
Losing tongues, I lost my identity.

But the tongues were still there
They just needed to learn new sounds.
After acquiring a degree with the third tongue
I thought I had a degree of fluency.
Hell, No!
When I say 'Librar' - what do you hear?

But every wrong turning is a learning curve.
My first tongue gave me the skills
to fight for a new identity
When the Home Office told me, 'Just say yes or no'
I knew what to do
"Ziwonadi! Iyayi!"





I recalled my second tongue
When I lived in St James' Church
Trying to cook for English people:
"Yamikani, you have to learn to cook tasteless food now!"

Living with strangers is hard.
Cultural difference can open up chasms
into which all my best intentions
fall soundless...'SOUNDLESS - LY'.

I thought I was speaking English, in my third tongue
but the English didn't agree.

The transition from tongue to tongue is not easy





ENGLISH

By Jade

I have spoken English
Since I was three years old
Together with my twin sister.

At home we would whisper the forbidden local language, Lango
We did not want to miss our lunch or dinner
And our stepmother, Cruella, did not speak a single word of English

When she saw our Dad coming
She would start talking Lango to us.
We would stand or kneel there looking at her
As if to say: "You want our Dad to beat us for speaking Lango?"

We would kneel there without a word
Shaking with fear.
Dad was a headmaster, a teacher and a Reverend
Whatever we did in school
We had to follow the protocol at home, too.

The only problem was
When he had finished his lunch and returned to school
She denied us our food
Because we had disobeyed her.

We spoke English in private.
We relied on our brother, Charles,
To keep some food for us in his pockets.

So now speaking Lango
Reminds me of going hungry.



I HAD A VOICE

By Shahab

I had a voice, when silence robbed me in court
When silence soaked my four-walled darkness.
I had a voice, until the judge's gavel knocked twice: 'Be silent!'

Silence didn't know, without my voice
silence was meaningless.
The echo of my stare, as it faded
irritated an old wound
pushing out clotting blood
as hopeful as hop blossoms, seeding in the crack of a wall,
playing hide and seek as they emerge.

My voice, hoarse from the lash of interrogation, didn't tremble
while the whisper of a lash shook the voices of others.

But
When your voice, harsh with hubris, deafens all inhabitants
Nothing stops me, dancing to the music of the lash.

When your voice germinates from silence
I am reminded of my own voice, rediscovered in suburbia.

How naive we are,
Waiting in the empty and deserted train station, for absurd sounds.
Leave it!

How are good voices supposed to flourish?
Leave it!

How many grievances do I have against our time?
Oh, leave it!



BOOKS

By Prossy

Books help you feel more confident
Books help you travel around the world
Books develop your personality
Books provide food for thought
Books make you laugh and think
Books bring out writing talent
Books help in communicating
Books clear vision
Books satisfy curiosity
Books help to make better choices
Books help to build literary talent
Books do not require special devices to teach
Books increase attention span
Books can be used any time, anywhere
Books provide entertainment when others fail
Books make you powerful





help to know the whys and hows of everything
help to update with facts and figures
help spread love, affection and knowledge
make the best of friends
take you to an intellectual environment
entertain the mind, broaden your horizon
bring about personality change
bring nature to your doorstep
They don't require company
Books are stress busters
Books provide mental and physical relaxation
Books provide emotional strength
Build self esteem
help you grow
take you to a world of dreams
transform lives, inspire, motivate wonderful experiences and achieving goals
Be challenged to start reading books
Not storing them!





MONEY

By Yonas

"I'd like to live as a poor man with lots of money"

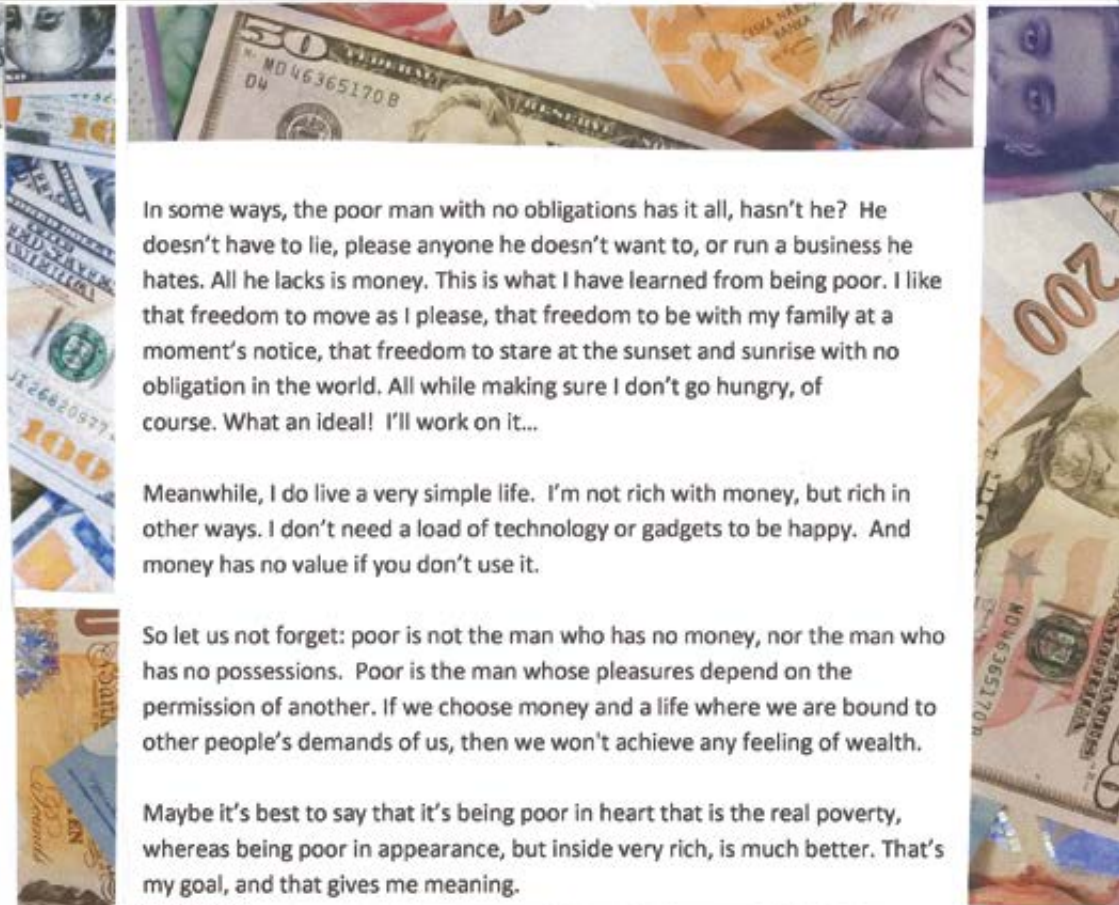
So said Picasso, and it's one of my favourite quotations on happiness. I think Picasso is right, because the poor generally have a better appreciation of the little things in life that people with money take for granted. It would be nice to be able to appreciate every little thing, yet not to have to deal with the struggles that come from living in poverty.

There are many people who are rich, but aren't happy or wealthy inside. There are people who are poor, made unhappy because they want wealth. I have a message for both these groups of people: It was when I pondered the intersection of money and happiness that I discovered a meaning and ideal for my life.

I'm not saying that money doesn't matter, but it shouldn't be the primary focus in life. That focus should be finding meaning, which will lead me to something that motivates me for its own sake. The time I *felt* the poorest was when I had the most money, but zero meaning in my life. When I thought of this, suddenly money wasn't as important.

Our goal should be enjoying the ride and letting the money fall where it may. We don't have to live lavishly, when we could live simply. We don't have to have heaps of money to feel rich. I find that being generous and achieving my own goals makes life less complicated and leads to a happier me. That, for me, is being rich.





In some ways, the poor man with no obligations has it all, hasn't he? He doesn't have to lie, please anyone he doesn't want to, or run a business he hates. All he lacks is money. This is what I have learned from being poor. I like that freedom to move as I please, that freedom to be with my family at a moment's notice, that freedom to stare at the sunset and sunrise with no obligation in the world. All while making sure I don't go hungry, of course. What an ideal! I'll work on it...

Meanwhile, I do live a very simple life. I'm not rich with money, but rich in other ways. I don't need a load of technology or gadgets to be happy. And money has no value if you don't use it.

So let us not forget: poor is not the man who has no money, nor the man who has no possessions. Poor is the man whose pleasures depend on the permission of another. If we choose money and a life where we are bound to other people's demands of us, then we won't achieve any feeling of wealth.

Maybe it's best to say that it's being poor in heart that is the real poverty, whereas being poor in appearance, but inside very rich, is much better. That's my goal, and that gives me meaning.



THE THING

By Marsha

I need the thing
You want that item
He dreamt of the mission
They all browse for the deal
I queue up for the new release
She bids on the piece.

Decades ago
Gullible me
Every time, I wanted the things that flashed on the idiot box.
My father used to do the trick and
bought me stuff from the corner shop.

I still want them
I have to have the whole lot.
Gondolas under the LED lighted supermarkets,
the black sheep of the utopian family:

Flickering micro data-based adverts
telling me you better have the things.

I am subsisting with multiple voices
inside my head.
Each of them has their own shopping cart
ceaselessly adding things to it.

I really want that thing.
Can you please not ask me -
what for?





POSSESSIONS

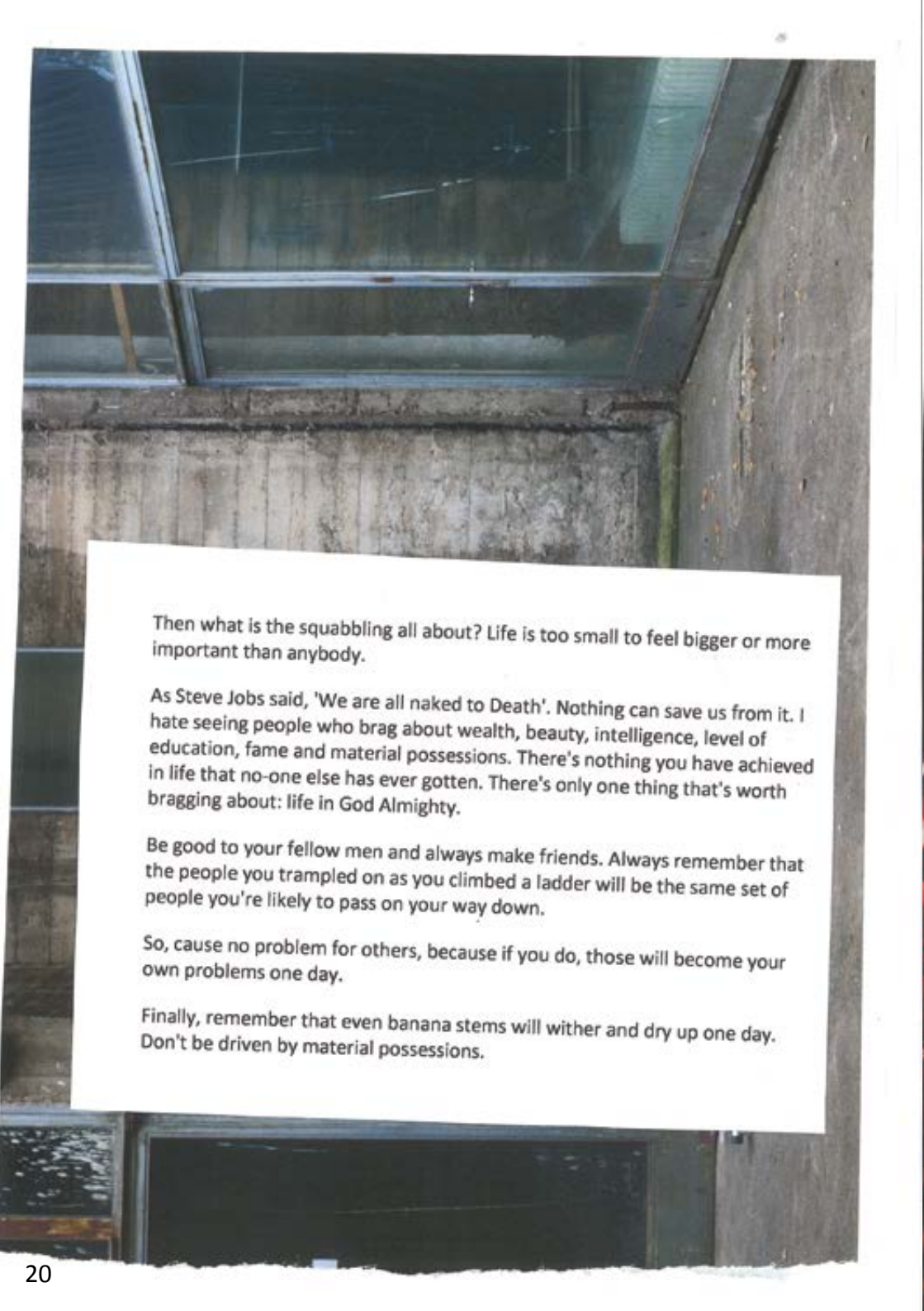
By Odong

Here is where my journey begins. It was a very happy beginning, and surrounded by Nature.

Some years back, it was the most beautiful house in the community. The owner, my father, was the richest man, to whom everybody looked for support. The vehicle was the cynosure of all eyes. It was a dream come true when my father added both house and car to his list of possessions.

But today, both properties have grown old, and in fulfilment of natural law must collapse, so a new home can be developed. Should anybody be found living inside this building as it stands now, such a person will be labelled 'insane' and must be kept at arm's length.

Nothing in life is worth fighting for. Your best clothes are someone else's rags, your bank balance is someone's charitable donation, your partner is someone's ex. Every prostitute you see on the street or in a hotel at night was at some point a virgin.

A photograph showing a white rectangular piece of paper with text, placed against a weathered concrete wall. To the left of the paper is a window with a metal frame. The scene is lit from above, casting shadows on the wall.

Then what is the squabbling all about? Life is too small to feel bigger or more important than anybody.

As Steve Jobs said, 'We are all naked to Death'. Nothing can save us from it. I hate seeing people who brag about wealth, beauty, intelligence, level of education, fame and material possessions. There's nothing you have achieved in life that no-one else has ever gotten. There's only one thing that's worth bragging about: life in God Almighty.

Be good to your fellow men and always make friends. Always remember that the people you trampled on as you climbed a ladder will be the same set of people you're likely to pass on your way down.

So, cause no problem for others, because if you do, those will become your own problems one day.

Finally, remember that even banana stems will wither and dry up one day. Don't be driven by material possessions.

RED

By Jean'Py

It's the feeling you have
when you get so mad at someone but
forgive them seconds later, as
you melt into their arms
and feel
the electricity sparking as your skin meets, and
your tears flow together as one

It's a love in which one day feels like
a lifetime, and
a lifetime feels like
one day

It's a feeling of panic, when you're so lost or confused and
can't think straight

It's the meaning of salvation for Christians

It's mysterious
speechless
shocked

It's the heart's love.
It's which you can't live without
It's red!

SOLIDARITY

By Tanya



Women clothed in their leader's regalia
Men, adorned in T-shirts with the leader's face on their broad chests.
The volume of their voices singing songs
Praise, adoration, appreciation and dedication could be heard miles away.
Milk and honey, they sang.

No matter how badly the weeds had grown in the fields,
people dropped everything to be there,
to attend the rally and listen first-hand.
They glided,
some carried cockerels, goats, baskets full of eggs,
or vegetables to give to the heroes who had fought and brought us freedom.

We loved them, our heroes.
Nobody wanted anyone to cough or whisper,
Nobody wanted to miss a single word.
We worshipped them like gods
hallowing the ground they walked on.
We became very close,
following everywhere they went, to show our solidarity.



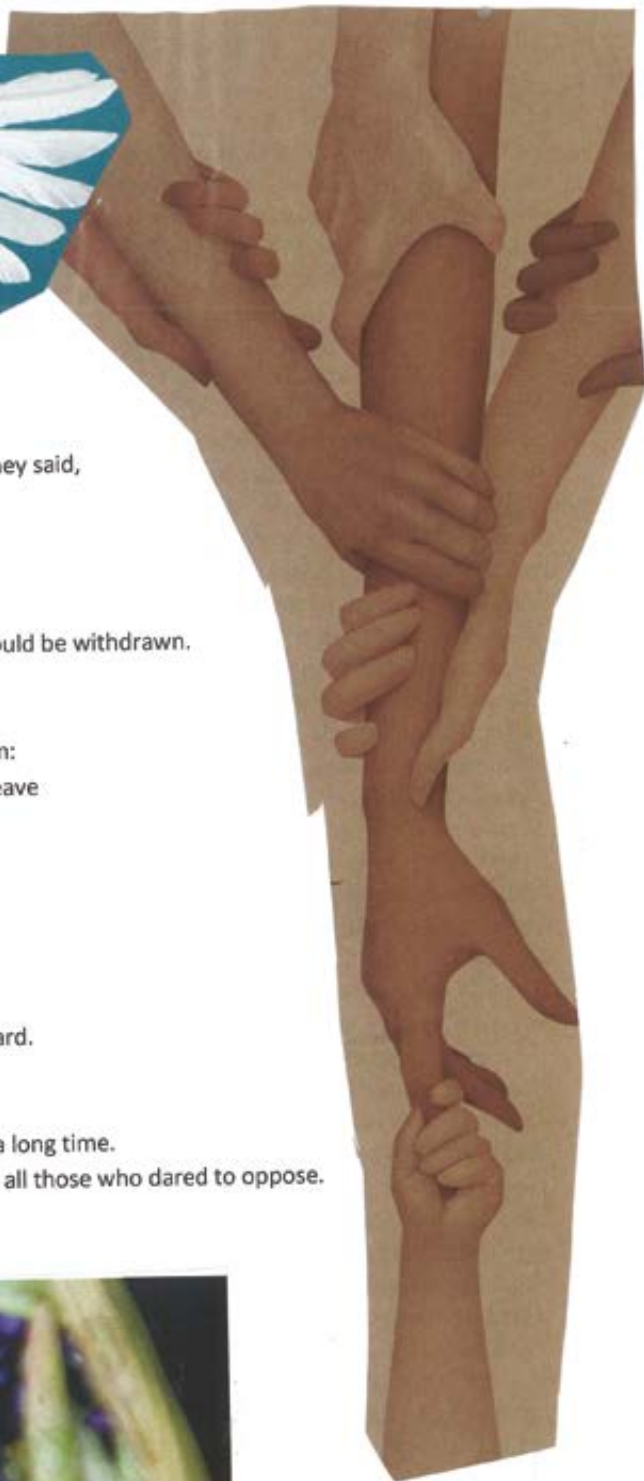
Then things began to change.
It came to me in an instance.
I had bought a new cup from a second-hand shop.
When I lifted it up to the sunlight, I couldn't see any flaws.
When I got home, I decided to christen it with a cup of tea.
But the moment I poured the boiling water, it cracked down the middle.
It came to me in an instant what was happening in our country.





Everything looked perfect, all the words they said,
but something was very wrong.
Meetings held in secret,
people began to attend less and less.
Chiefs were threatened.
Villagers needed to attend, or food aid would be withdrawn.
The threats became more frequent
and then the militia used their force.
Gates were shut, and militia manned them:
people could come in, but no one could leave
even if you had medical problems.
Then came the public flogging
of those who had deserted.

Brutal! It was brutal.
All our hopes, dreams shattered.
All we wanted was to have our voices heard.
To build the country as one.
But all was denied.
We had been in solidarity with them for a long time.
Now they were stabbing us and maiming all those who dared to oppose.
All we had wanted,
was solidarity.





HERE, THERE AND EVERYWHERE


By Joy

In Africa there is war
Every second, every minute, every hour
Everywhere there is blood
Everywhere bodies
Like animals in a butcher's window
ICI et là-bas


No food
No medication
No water to drink
Everywhere the noise of gunshots and shelling
Everywhere the currency of weapons
ICI et là bas

In Ukraine there is war
On our televisions only talk of Ukraine
Collections of money
Collections of clothes
Of medication
ICI et là bas





Everywhere men are fighting
Everywhere the cruelty of war
Human life has no value
Blood flows
No Peace
Ici et là-bas



Yes, they are dying like chickens there too
We know they are dying there
Are the people dying in Ukraine not of the same blood as the people of Africa?
Oh, my country!
Ici et là bas





COMPASSION

By Nalougo

In the shadow of inner suffering,
In the depths of my tormented mind
There was a deafening silence.

I needed a calming hand to soothe my anguish.
You saw my distress
My face marked by trials and sorrow,
You refused to see me suffer.
You refused to see me lose my reason to live.

To put an end to this distress,
Regardless of the colour of my skin
My religion or my culture,
With tenderness and love
You reached for my hand and offered a blessed sanctuary.
You gave me a shoulder to lean on
To calm the storms that raged in my heart
To quiet a mind racked with phantom memories.





With you
I shared my weeping.
At the same time,
You wiped my tears without considering yours,
Which flowed because of me.
Through these gestures
You bandaged my wounds.
You gave me hope.
You gave me a second chance to live.

It has been said
To heal the wounds of the dead soul,
Compassion envelops each in its tender embrace
Brings hope and comfort, in the darkness of life.
We should all remember this: we offer compassion
Because we too will long for it, one day.

LIMINALITY

By Haydeh

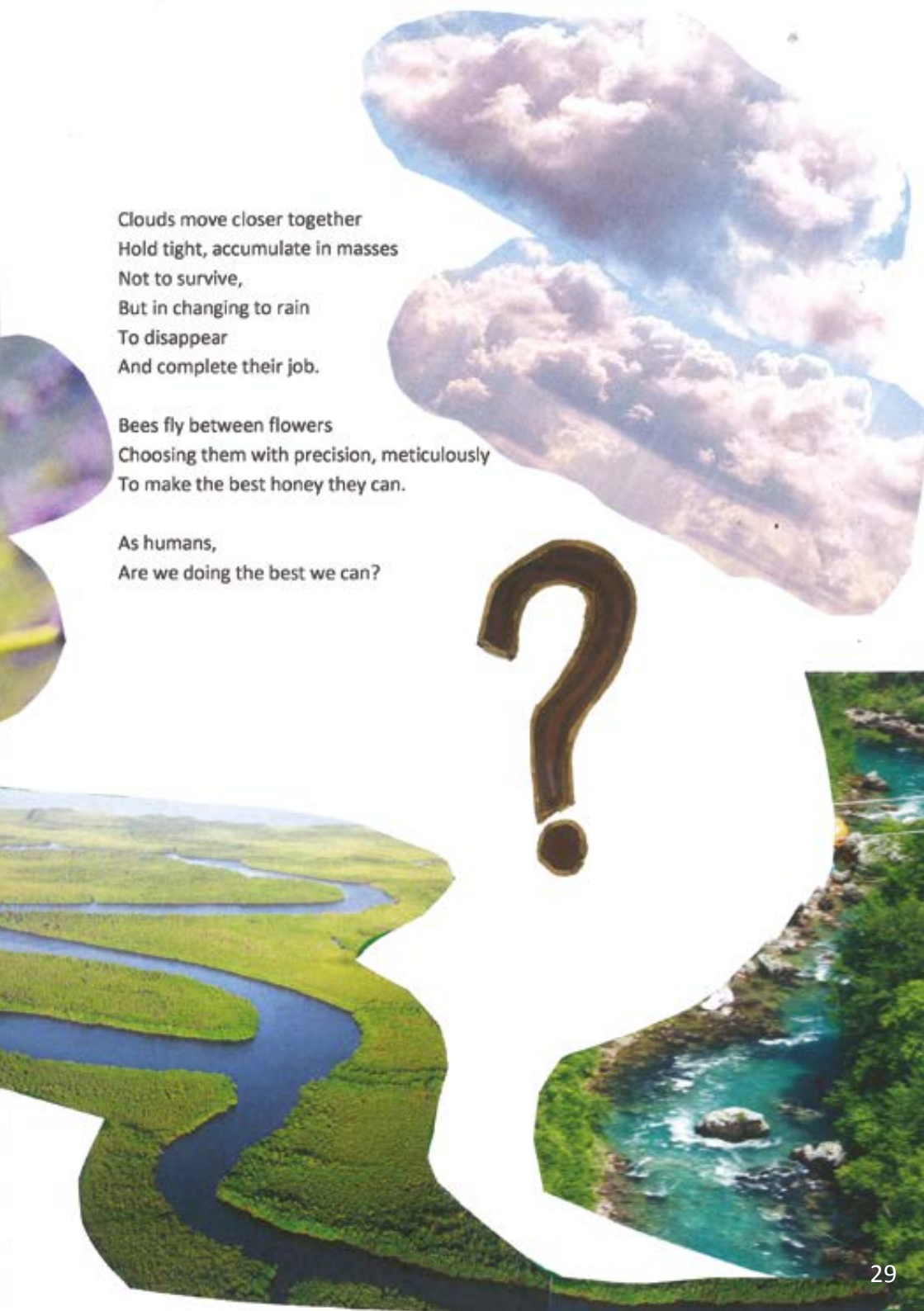
The Moon rises above the surrounding, shiny stars
Not to compete with the Sun
But to allow it to rest.

Your face can feel droplets of rain
Not falling from the sky just for you
But to refresh the earth's flower petals.

The river moves and is constant
Not to make a noise or shake the pebbles underneath
But to travel far and reach the sea.

The birds sing in Spring
Not for one to listen in admiration
But to sing freely and unleash their feelings.





Clouds move closer together
Hold tight, accumulate in masses
Not to survive,
But in changing to rain
To disappear
And complete their job.

Bees fly between flowers
Choosing them with precision, meticulously
To make the best honey they can.

As humans,
Are we doing the best we can?

IN MY MOTHER TONGUE

By Shahab

Let me invite you, in my mother tongue
When I can't express myself
In the language you dance to
Let me love you
in my mother tongue

Foreign poems caress with the breeze of love
Please, for once
Let me hug you
In my mother tongue

I cherish how I feel reading Shakespeare
As though I've put on a foreigner's clothes, yet still smell like myself
Give me a chance to win you
With rich Hafez poems from Persia
Bathing you in tenderness
In my mother tongue

ہم

قلب عشق

آغوش

شراب زبانِ مادری سے
شعر



Call to me the way you call to your neighbours
Face to face, in the morning, with a smile
But let me call back to you
From the universe of smiles
In my mother tongue

Speak your heart to me
Unburden yourself of things never said before
I offer you all my truth
Let me be all ears
In my mother tongue

The wine of your kindness may fill my glass
But my love can fill an ocean
I can make you drunk
in my mother tongue



LOVE

By Tanya



"Do you still remember our early years of marriage?
How you used to hold my hands?"

Aaron shuffled over and held Nora's hands.

"And how you used to kiss me?"

He leans over and kisses her passionately on the lips.

"How you used to nibble my ears?"

Aaron stands up and shuffles into the house.

Alarmed, Nora shouts,

"Where are you going?"

"To get my teeth," answers Aaron.

Love!!

Love has no borders

No age

It's all-encompassing.

It consumes you

It's timeless

Every human being craves it

No matter at what stage of life.



The love you feel for your newborn child

Gazing into her frank and encouraging face

Her smile, more luminous than the Sun beginning to rise.

We have a vacuum in our hearts

That can be filled with love only

A vacuum that, when filled,

Becomes a river of life

That satisfies deeply

At the core of our being.



LOVE



WRITERS' BIOGRAPHIES

Haydeh

Haydeh is from Iran and was imprisoned for political reasons. Living in England as a refugee has shown her new aspects of life. Studying at university, working as a school teacher and joining the Write to Life group has given her the motivation and enthusiasm to learn more about literature and music.

Jade

Jade was born in East Africa, studied journalism and worked as a sports reporter. After members of her family were killed and her own life was threatened, Jade was forced to flee and arrived in the UK in 2001. She joined Write to Life fourteen years ago. Jade volunteers at the Refugee Council, published her first collection, *Moving A Country*, in 2013, and regularly recites her work in the UK.

Jean'py

Jean'py is a refugee from Central Africa. He was a Christian leader in his country and worked as an IT engineer. After being imprisoned three times for political reasons, he fled to the UK following persecution by his government. He has been a member of Write to Life for seven years.

Marsha

Marsha is from Bangladesh, where she worked as a journalist. She came to the UK in 2012 to study international relations. Due to her family's involvement in national politics, her life and those of her family members were endangered. Freedom from Torture helped her to feel safe again. Since 2017 she has been a member of Write to Life, pursuing her passion for creative writing with the help of mentors.





Nalougo

Nalougo is a science teacher from Ivory Coast. He has been coming to Write to Life since 2019. He wasn't aware of his poetic gift before joining the group. He speaks French and Senoufo. Writing in a new language helps him to express himself and relieves the sorrow inside him. He thinks everybody should join Write to Life!

Odong




Odong is from Uganda. She has a degree in Human Resources Management and several other diplomas and qualifications, and held many positions within the Kampala Capital City Authority. After being brutally tortured and imprisoned for political reasons, she has been in London since 2018 and is trying to cope with her hardships.

Prossy

Prossy is from Burundi. After fleeing with the help of a stranger, she ended up locked in a house in London for three and half years before she escaped. Prossy thanks Write to Life for giving her the moral support to become who she is now, and for helping her with her new life in London and to feel comfortable in their homes. When she joined the group at least her tears stopped, though sometimes they still fall.

Shahab

Shahab means 'shooting star'. He arrived from a country which has never accepted religion in a true sense and where the youth are still tolerating the disastrous results of their fathers' revolution. He suffered violence in prison for speaking freely. He is an avid musician and author who thinks there is a predetermined path in the cosmos for every person to use in order to spread their radiance and make the world a better place for all creatures. His star's destiny brought him to the UK and the gods shone on him in 2019 when he arrived at Freedom from Torture.



Tanya

Tanya was born in Zimbabwe, where she was a primary school teacher for fifteen years. Tanya and her family started speaking out against the regime in 1999, when it was becoming more and more oppressive and violent. Some of her family were killed and maimed as a result of their protests and Tanya was forced to flee. She arrived in the UK in 2013 and was referred to Freedom from Torture in 2017. Tanya loves nature, gardening and writing.

Tracy

Tracy thanks Freedom from Torture, especially Write to Life and its volunteers, who have given her the moral support to start a new life and become who she is now. Sharing her experiences through poetry and other writing helps her come to terms with her trauma.

Yonas

Yonas was studying biomedicine at university in East Africa when he joined a protest meeting. He was arrested, tortured and imprisoned for a year. When he was temporarily released, he grasped the opportunity to escape to the UK, arriving in 2002. In 2021, he finally received indefinite leave to remain, which means he has the security of family life here with his partner and two children. He joined Write to Life in 2017. A lifelong writer, he is passionate about writing.





MENTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Ella Berry

Ella lives in South East London and has been a Write to Life mentor since the beginning of 2020. She is doing a PhD exploring storytelling as a feminist methodology, and enjoys reading and writing creative non-fiction. Ella mentors Tanya, and loves working with her on her beautiful poems and stories.

Simon Bracken

Simon is poet, story writer and community worker from south London. He is currently on the Cinnamon press mentorship scheme to complete a poetry collection. By day, he's a gardener, after-school playworker and researcher. He is currently mentoring Shahab and Yonas.

Rogelio Braga

Rogelio is an exiled playwright, novelist, publisher, and human rights activist from the Philippines and currently lives in London as a refugee. They have published two novels, a book of plays, and a book of stories before arriving in the UK in 2018. The translation of their book of stories "Is There Rush Hour In a Third World Country?" was published by the 87Press in London in November 2022. Braga is currently working on their practice-based PhD while teaching creative writing at the School of Arts, Birkbeck, University of London.

Sheila Hayman

Sheila coordinates Write to Life in between her film and other projects. Working in film and TV her projects are, for the most part, transitory and ephemeral. The huge satisfaction of Write to Life has been seeing it grow steadily, from a small group of half a dozen writing for themselves and each other, to fifteen or more skilled and confident writers and performers holding their own in public arenas from the Victoria and Albert Museum to the Tate Gallery, the Roundhouse and top literary festivals. Sheila mentors Marsha and Nalougo.





Lucy Katz

Lucy has been the Assistant Coordinator for Write to Life since December 2021. With a background in theatre and literature, she was attracted to the group by the quality of the writing and the inimitable nature of the project. Since 2015, she has been an immigration adviser and advice worker for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants at Salisbury World and Women for Refugee Women. Lucy is also a musician and is the drummer of a feminist punk band.

Lucy Popescu

Lucy has been a mentor with Write to Life for twelve years. She worked with the English Centre of PEN, the international association of writers, for over 20 years and was Director of its Writers in Prison Committee. She is the author of *The Good Tourist* and has published two anthologies, *A Country to Call Home*, focusing on the experiences of young refugees, and *A Country of Refuge*, a collection of writing on refugees and asylum seekers by some of Britain and Ireland's finest writers. Lucy works with Aso and Jade.

Emi Slater

Emi has been a mentor with Write to Life for eleven years. She is a teacher, trainer and former theatre director. She finds working with the writers in this group deeply inspiring and never ceases to be warmed by their enormous and joyous approach to life. Emi mentors Joy and Kayitesi.

A very warm welcome to our new mentors Louise Warren, Megan Toogood and Sarah Towle.





About Write to Life

Write to Life is a creative writing group for clients and ex clients at Freedom from Torture. Our members meet every fortnight, to process their past experiences in a safe environment, and to build a future founded on self-expression and creativity in the English language, through stories and ideas. Some writers have been with us from the start, others come and go, and sometimes come back again. Write to Life has been working with survivors from around the world for more than 25 years, and we believe that makes it unique in the world.

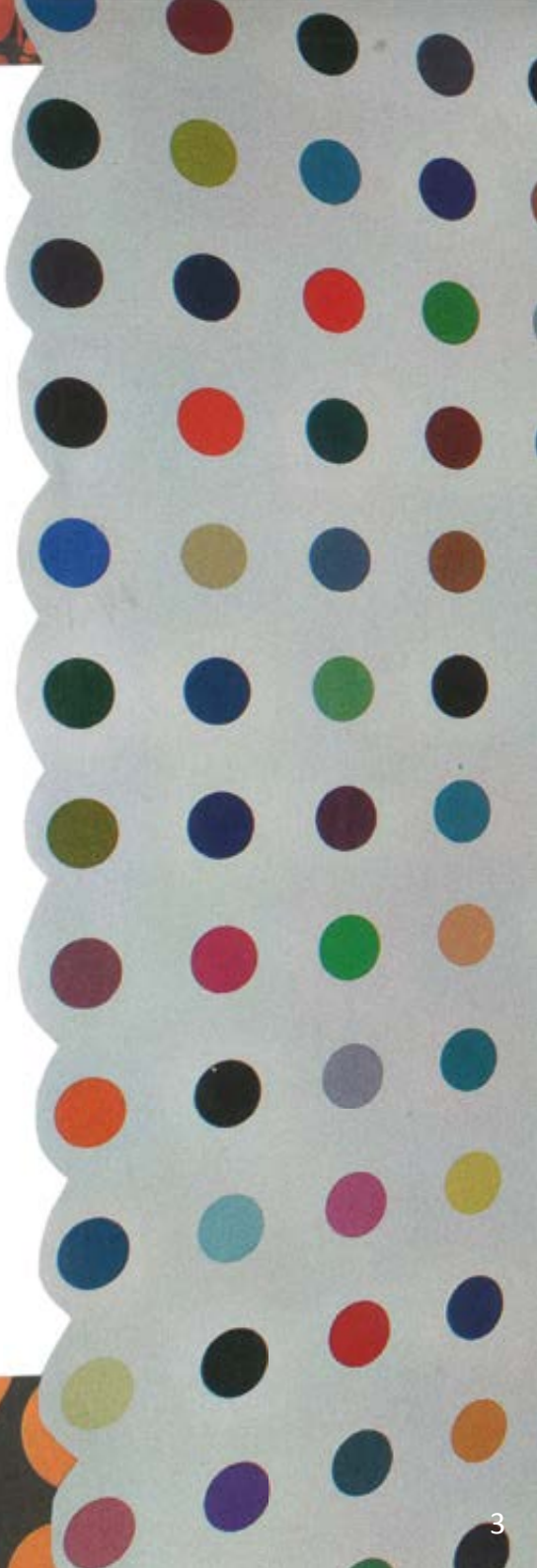
About Freedom from Torture

Freedom from Torture is dedicated to healing and protecting people who have survived torture. We provide therapies to improve physical and mental health, we medically document torture, and we provide legal and welfare help. We expose torture globally, we fight to hold torturing states to account and we campaign for fairer treatment of torture survivors in the UK. For nearly 40 years, through our services, we have been helping survivors overcome their torture and live better, happier lives.



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Collages by the writers and mentors








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