



FREEDOM FROM TORTURE

EMPOWERING
SURVIVORS.
REBUILDING
LIVES

PAWNS, PRINCESSES AND POETS
WRITE TO LIFE AT THE V&A

WRITE TO LIFE

Write to Life is the creative writing and performance group that supports current and former clients from Freedom from Torture to tell stories in different art forms. Write to Life is the longest-running refugee-writing group in Britain, and the only one specifically for survivors of torture.

Members come from all over the world and have built an impressive body of work, including collaborations with the Roundhouse, both Tate Galleries, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Each writer has selected an object that spoke to their own experience – from the Great Bed of Ware to the Ardabil Carpet – and has written about them from a perspective entirely different from what most visitors to the Museum might expect. We hope these fresh insights will enable this week's visitors to see the displays with new eyes.

For more information or to be added to our mailing list, please contact WriteToLife@freedomfromtorture.org

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.

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CHESS by JEANPY

I'm a very kind chess player. I have played for a few months. When I first met friends who played chess, it was on a Wednesday at Freedom from Torture, after a therapy session. One of my friends invited me to join them in the chess club. The room was completely quiet.

There are people who are very clever – you can't beat them: if it happens that somebody tries and fails, the room erupts in laughter. But otherwise it's quiet.

Once I was in the room where they were playing, I was both confused and at the same time a little bit excited. Confused, why? Because I didn't know the rules of the game, the names of the pieces and how they're laid out – the whole composition. Excited, why? Because I was ready to learn a new game.

The leader of the chess group took care of me by explaining the rules of the game and everything else – even though it was a lot to take in and not easy to understand. At first, I was quite a weak player myself. After three sessions of teaching, I was ready to play with my friends, but wondered why I lost game after game. Day after day I tried very hard to improve, by following a carefully thought out plan. I couldn't believe how much time and effort it took to improve. I felt I was doing something wrong and wasting my time. But it was not so. It was not a waste. The effort of improving was the key. It taught me the value of persevering.

It was like fighting with myself: why are you losing? You need to win. But I learned that I had to have patience with myself, to be kind to myself, in order to have time to learn. And that was something I was able to take away from that room, into the rest of my life. I understood as well that chess is not just about winning, but developing your mind, your ability to plan and strategise. And imagine. I found myself downloading a chess app onto my phone, which I would play against myself on the way there and on the way back home.

By spending almost two hours every Wednesday playing chess at Freedom from Torture, and about an hour every day on the app, I started to win some games, and gained confidence. That confidence carried over into the rest of my life. Sometimes you have ups and downs and you have to be confident that you can survive them.

The chess pieces and their names are evocative. You have the king and queen, the knights and the bishops – and they are also the institutions of this country. And the castles: all those landlords with their huge estates. Some people, like those landlords, go straight for what they want. Some, like the bishops, are cunning and take a sideways route. The Queen can go where she wants. And when the Queen goes, the game is over. I can't imagine this country without the Queen.

But the little pawn has to go very slowly, step by step, to get where it wants to go. And it only gets there by persevering.

I don't want to lose in life. But losing in chess was helping me to learn. You lose because you make mistakes, but you learn from those mistakes. And day by day you gain wisdom and knowledge.

Before starting, I can have many things in my head. I might not have money, means to get there – it's not easy. But once you sit down, you are there, your concentration and focus are there, because you want to win. When you are there, playing with friends, you want to win. And in order to win, you have to concentrate on what's in front of you. All your mind has to be there. And so I understood why it was part of therapy.

So here I am, just a pawn in the game. But I know now that even a pawn can win.

About the Author

I am from the Democratic Republic of Congo. I have a masters in computing management from the Université Libre de Kinshasa. I have lived in the United Kingdom since 2013. I enjoy writing, singing, and preaching.

THRONE by TRACY



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It was in 1980, in my father's country, when I was six years old. A drum was beaten early in the morning; women were ululating and men were clapping and dancing. I didn't understand what was happening. I only saw three elderly women, in their sixties, coming towards the hut where I was sleeping with my older cousins. My cousins made way for them, and the three women knelt in front of me and said, 'May you live long, Princess of the land'. I just thought it was their way of saying, 'Good morning'. Then they told me that, that day was a big day for my grand daddy and the bath was ready for me. They wanted to carry me to the bathroom, which was very strange. I refused and ran away, but my mother talked to me so I'd understand what was happening.

My mother told me that my father was the first born to my granddaddy and I am the first born to my father; we had an important role to play that day. So I agreed to it and then they bathed me. After the bath, I looked as though they'd poured a jar of oil over me. They dressed me in a silver dress and lots of jewelry. The dress was very long, and I tripped over it twice. They told me I was not supposed to run around but to sit in the room where my daddy and granddaddy were, till the time came for my granddaddy's coronation.

Standing in the museum, staring at a golden chair displayed behind the glass, I got lost in my thoughts. It was so like the one I saw when my grandfather was crowned king, after the death of my great granddaddy.

The only difference was that the chair I am writing about had ivory legs. It was brought to the coronation square in a cart driven by a brown and white horse, guided by a palace guard wearing a green tunic and black trousers.

I remember very well how everyone was summoned to gather at the coronation square. I remember all the assorted villagers who came for the big day, to witness the coronation of the new king at the trumpet's blast.

While I was wandering, lost in my thoughts, the museum guide said, 'Whoever needs to sit, come and sit in front of this fabric.' I raised my head and looked towards her. Immediately I

saw a robe which was so like the one in which I was dressed that day as the first princess. I must have walked towards her like a model on a catwalk - but then reality bounced back in my face. I sobered up, and realised these were only memories.

The museum guide kept on telling us about other objects in the museum, but my mind was not at peace.

I asked myself, 'Who am I?'

My answer was, 'You know; you were born a princess, but now you're a refugee'. Then I said to myself, 'So I could say that I am the refugee princess Yamikani'.

Another thought responded, 'There's no such thing as that! That's your muddled thoughts.' I wish I could reverse time. I wish I could explain my story. But given a choice, I would have remained wearing the beautiful dress as princess Yamikani.

This is the most painful thing about happy memories. I can't forget them, but neither can I bring back that reality. With those memories, the pain of becoming a refugee came back to my mind.

Don't get me wrong: I am very grateful that I was recognised as a refugee in the UK. But can you imagine how it is, to live from birth to motherhood in my early twenties with this identity, living a luxurious life?

Then, due to circumstances, having to flee, to leave that life and embrace a new identity of which I knew nothing?

Sometimes I feel like a bat, which cannot be categorised, either as bird or animal. I don't know whether to be happy that I'm safe, or sad that I'm no longer who I was.

Princess Yamikani, keep the feelings of a princess in your heart and remember to stay positive; use your painful experiences in a positive way.

About the Author

I was born in Harare to a Zimbabwean mother and a father whose family were from Malawi. Due to difficult circumstances, I fled Zimbabwe and became a refugee in the UK. After six years I was reunited with my daughter whom I brought here to live with me. Before I left Zimbabwe I was an electrical engineer and here in UK, I have now completed a degree in Health and Social Welfare and a Masters in Business Administration (MBA). In terms of education, nothing will stop me!



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THE GREAT BED OF WARE

by **YONATHAN**

The Great Bed of Ware is an extremely large oak bed made in the reign of Elizabeth I and originally housed in the White Hart Inn in Ware, a popular overnight stopover for pilgrims on the route from London to the shrine at Walsingham.

It is 3 metres wide and can apparently sleep more than 15 people, but when I sleep on the Great Bed of Ware in my dreams, it's just my wife and me. When the first ray of light leaks through the blind and assaults my eyelids, the blind and assaults my eyelids, the blind and assaults my eyelids, shadows. All I want at this moment is to watch my dream and sleep for a thousand years. But then I hear tiny footsteps against the wood floor. Before I can open my eyes, a little hand claps my face. "Dada," I hear and I scoop up a small body that smells of doughy sweetness. She climbs on to my body as if it were a jungle gym. She squeezes herself between my wife and me. We both cuddle her and wrap our arms around her. I bury my face in my pillow, throw the covers over my head, but I am outnumbered; my 7 year-old daughter bounces on the Great Bed of Ware like a trapeze artist. My wife declares it a glorious morning in our hotel with the famous Bed of Ware.

I want to forget all my stressful and terrifying past. I no longer need salvation, sanctuary, refuge. I think about how lucky I am to have so much, to have all my love here in one place in the world, together and safe. I think it is a damn good thing to have the Great Bed of Ware to ourselves, all together in the Great Bed, where we would feel safe and protected from harm.

Waking up from my sweet dream, I want to write about this very special bed whose history has been well documented. I remember those people in my life, both alive and dead, all reunited thanks to the generosity of the Great Bed.

About the Author

I live in London with my wife and two kids. One of the worst things about torture is that it silences you, but Write to Life has given me back my voice, thanks to Freedom from Torture. I love to write about anything and to reclaim the voice that torture has so cruelly tried to silence.



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SUGAR BOX AND SAMSONITE

by **NADINE**

This sugar box, kept locked and containing something very precious, is like me in many ways. I am a tiny black suitcase, given away by my previous owner to her younger daughter who she felt would keep me safe, and look after me better than she could.

I have to say, she has done so very well. My new owner is very secretive, and very good at hiding things in me. I have been looking after all the things she didn't want people to know about ever since I was passed on to her.

I have looked after secret letters, most of which she wrote to herself, expressing her sad feelings and childhood memories. I have also looked after her money, items abandoned by other people, things that other family members refused to keep but she decided to cherish. I am her best friend, you could say.

Everybody in the house talks about me. They are all curious to know what I keep secret, and why she looks after me so carefully. Like the sugar box, I too have witnessed many

conversations, when people gathered around, and heard them wonder how much more I could hold. Nobody else has access to me, she locks me with a special code. Many of them have tried trying to open me, but to this day she has never revealed the code to anyone.

I have lines and wrinkles, silver coloured like the engraving on the box. I call them the bruises of my life. They sometimes remind me of shameful secrets that I am forced to keep. Although on the outside, I am this expensive item, used by most people for showing off, my biggest speciality is keeping secrets.

My first owner had expensive jewellery which she kept in me. But my new owner has no jewellery, nor is she rich so for her, these secret items have been more valuable to her than anything else in the world.

These things meant a lot to her: memories, childhood, the family. Things which, once lost, cannot be recovered.

That suitcase is my sister's: it belonged before to my mother.

But I have another suitcase that I prefer. It goes with me everywhere and holds all my secrets. It's also locked; nobody else can see what's inside. It's not something only the wealthy can afford. It's not heavy; it's not even visible. But it's the secret engine of my mind and body. It's locked against intruders who search for answers, for the whys and hows. This one has locked itself, concealing inside painful events in my life which it refuses to share even with me. It is my brain.

About the Author

Nadine fled the war in her country, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to seek refuge in the UK. Since then, Nadine has been a member of Write to Life and the Survivors Speak Out Network (SSO) to advocate against the use of torture worldwide. Nadine has co-facilitated workshops on raising awareness of issues that survivors of sexual violence face; one of her poems, 'My Hands', was interpreted in music by the distinguished composer Kate Whitley.



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A PIECE OF STOLEN TIME

by **MARSHA GLENN**

Beetles!

I am trying hard to remember what that is!

Inside the dark, cold gallery, where the echo from visitors of all ages buzzes between the walls, I squint my eyes, as if that can help me to visualise what the word means in the animal planet.

Only the famous picture of the rock band, the Beatles, at the zebra crossing on Abbey Road appears in front of my eyes. I dismiss that picture immediately, I am standing in the middle of the South Asian craft collection, brought by the British Empire to the heart of London. I am still busy, trying to conjure the image with the help of my first English word book. I find no clue to help me translate the English word 'beetles' into Bengali. What does it look like? The paisley design and bright colour combinations grip me with their beauty. I follow my tour-guide's little torch and enjoy how the colours change. She is well prepared, but I cannot move on from the word Beetles! My eyes flit between the fine golden thread and the green-blue sequins all over the piece. It has made a long journey from the Indian subcontinent to today's Great Britain, where millions can see it, but none can touch or feel it.

My tour guide's voice becomes a background narrative in my head. She can't see but there's a film running there. Places, rulers, rebels, heroes, revolution, sacrifice, betrayal, manipulation, torture, protest, songs, literature: two hundred years of struggle push through the frame. The economic strategies of the British empire's industrial revolution pushed the peasant to make a choice: either to fulfil the landlord's impossible revenue target, or protect his dignity, lands, and family. Forced to move from subsistence farming to cultivating cash crops, like indigo, he not only had his family's self-sufficiency snatched from him, but also the health of his land in the next season. The tradition of the incomparable handloom weaving mills and community-based handicraft production was replaced by the mass production strategy of the East-India Company.

At this point my tour guide pauses dramatically, to reveal the secret of the iridescent embroidery.

No one can deny that countless lives were sacrificed during the building of the Pyramids, the Taj Mahal and so on. People argue that status has always determined the value of human life. Those are perhaps the same people who determine the value of an asylum seeker's life in Britain today. People who've fled their own country should be thankful that they are still alive. Even if it's in a detention centre, or living on £36 a week.

How about the life one of Nature's tiny creatures?

I feel a shiver running through my body as I realise that the embroidery on display here is made of beetles' wings. I want to know how many wings were used to create this piece? How long it took the maker to create it? That information, crucial at least to me, is missing.

I start to imagine the collection of beetle wings. I imagine young boys looking for beetles in the forest, walking along the riverbank, keeping an eye on fields stripped by the harvest. I am not convinced by assurances that it was done sustainably. I know young people will do anything to fit in. Sooner or later some kids would get the reputation of being unbeatable collectors of beetle wings. They would have their secret places to find more beetles, quick techniques to separate undamaged wings from silent bodies.

I can also see the soldiers of Her Majesty, come to the famous craftsman's house to order this unique embroidery for the royal family. Everyone from the neighbourhood gathered outside the craftsman's house. He is shaking, standing with his palms pressed together, as if he has done something terrible and is asking for mercy. I wonder, did the maker get a fair remuneration for his craftsmanship? How much? How much tax the appointed Landlord, the Zamindar, demanded on these earnings?

My museum tour comes to the end. So many thoughts bound up in a single piece of fabric. Special thanks to all the people who are keeping it, and its history, safe.

About the Author

Marsha Glenn is a Bangladeshi journalist, living in the UK since 2012. She worked as a freelance feature journalist, staff writer, and sub-editor on a number of daily newspapers and magazines in Bangladesh and in Bengali community media in the UK. Her academic expertise is in Peace and Conflict Studies, International relations and Politics and Management Accounting. Due to her family's involvement in national politics, Marsha can only live with freedom and security here in the UK.



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THE TURBAN

by HILYASS

Speaking to his grandson, Winston Churchill said: 'Learn all that you can, about the past; it's the only way to find out, what will happen in future.'

A museum is a permanent institution, that serves to remind a society of how it's developed. Open to the public, it allows them to research the history of humanity and the universe, to preserve and display things for study and education. And to pass on important information, about how civilisations change, from one period to the next.

Museums have many different ways of living, so every culture, passes on its own traditions, including those concerning plants and animals, and puts them on display. Museums serve as the holders of authenticity, values, knowledge and facts.

In Ivory Coast we have five different museums: in Abidjan there's the Museum of Civilisation, an archive of Ivorian cultural heritage, contemporary art, archaeology and ethnography. Also the national museum of military history. It has weapons, orders and decorations. In the rest of the country, there is the national costume museum, with a collection of traditional costumes from all regions of the country. It's in Grand Bassam. The fourth is the Binger Museum, where you'll find everything associated with this early coloniser, who built a city and called it after himself: 'Bingerville'. Finally there's the Parc M'Poussou, the Museum of Bonoua. It was created to promote the Abourou Tribe.

In all of these museums you have to pay to get in. By contrast, London has twenty-three free museums. When I discovered this, visiting with this group, I was surprised and pleased.

The Victoria and Albert Museum was the first I visited in London. I was attracted by this particular object first because it was beautiful, and then I saw the stainless steel on top, and I was curious about that.

In 1699, all men from the Sikh military were given the surname 'Singh', meaning 'Lion' because of their invincible army. They had a reputation for their power, their aggression in battle and superb horsemanship.

They wore a hat called the Akali Turban with steel discs around it. This example was made in about 1850. When you see it, it looks beautiful. You'd never guess it was a weapon. The rings are so decorative with their engravings; they don't look like something that could kill somebody. So when I saw it, I was astonished. I thought, 'How did they use this hat to fight, without any other weapon?'

Then I realised that these stainless steel discs could decapitate somebody, if thrown with enough force and accuracy. Maybe they put these discs around the hat so they would have their hands free when galloping on a horse and their bodies would be unencumbered and agile. A sword would be heavy and hard to wield on horseback.

The British conquered the Sikhs at about the time this helmet was made; because they were such powerful fighters, they were forced into the British army. They took the entire empire away from the Sikhs, and they also took this turban.

The week after my first visit, I went back, this time to the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum. I was excited to discover them, as I was a science teacher back home.

There are so many levels, and the higher you go, the more you find. And it's all free. I think all museums should be free, as they are here, because they're part of the history of the country.

They must serve students, researchers, and the public at large; but perhaps, most of all, the children, who will be the scientists and artists of tomorrow. To make sure, as Churchill said, that the next generation can build on the best of the past.

About the Author

Back home I was a science teacher. I came to London in July 2016 and claimed asylum here. Whether I stay here or go back depends on the government there. But I miss my family very much. I had two sons, but the older one died and I've never met the younger one. I would like to be reunited with him and my wife, and resume my life as a teacher.



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THE MUSEUM

by **JADE AMOLI—JACKSON**

I have often thought about turning my small living room into a museum. One day I had a brainwave as to how I was going to do this. I knew it would be difficult.

I started by pulling out my old boxes where I keep my old or torn shoes. I usually get goose bumps when I see how old they have become. I am lucky because of these shoes, second-hand clothes, bedsheets, plates, saucepans and winter jackets. I cannot remember how I got them all, but I wholeheartedly thank the wonderful people who gave them to me.

I begin to dust them but this is not enough. I go to my local market and buy a cheap shoe polish and get to work on making them more presentable so that they will look good in my sitting-room museum. I also wash and iron the clothes, given to me by wonderful people, which I've outgrown. When they gave them to me, some of them were too big because I was thin but now I have put some meat on my bones and they do not fit me anymore.

I am going to turn them into show pieces because, when I see them, they bring back memories of leaving my former country with nothing, and meeting people who gave these things to me freely as well as love and security. It is phenomenal.

The museum is not going to be just for clothing, shoes and other possessions. I will also open a section for food from my hometown: Millet, sweet potatoes, cassava, yam, mangoes, pawpaw, bananas - small, big, green and yellow - they will have a place in my Museum.

I will ensure I have a section for animals; big and small: Elephants, cows, zebras, lions, giraffes, leopards, cheetahs, buffalos, foxes and small animals like springbok, hyenas, warthog, antelopes, dogs, rabbits, squirrels, hares, rats and cats. (I will not put the rats near the cats because I do not want them to disappear overnight after the cats have turned them into food). There will be a section for birds, who are our brothers and sisters, and water animals, like crocodiles and hippos, and fish of all sizes.

I hope it will be visited by people who would like to know how somebody can be robbed of everything, but still come from the other side of the world and make a new life in London.

About the Author

Born in Northern Uganda, I studied journalism at Makerere University and after graduation worked as a sports reporter. When my father and twin sister were murdered, I left Uganda for the UK in 2001 and I have been a part of Freedom from Torture since then. My work at the Refugee Council since 2004 has given me a new family of dear friends.

THE BED by JOY



© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

When I was little back home, I used to lie down to sleep in a big bed. It was made of wood with a big comfortable mattress with simple bed sheets, one yellow blanket and four pillows. Normally four people could sleep on it. It was quite high off the ground and underneath you could put your shoes. Above it was a tiled roof which I could see directly from the bed. It was very noisy specially when it was raining and when it was too hot I could hear the tiles cracking.

I slept in this bed for seven years, from age seven to fourteen. Sometimes I lay on the bed and looked up to see the holes left by the builder in the roof – I could see the sky from her bed. When it rained, the water fell directly onto me. Sometimes it fell on my head, sometimes my stomach, sometimes my foot... I had to choose which body part should get wet first, so I kept having to change my position in the bed. Sometimes I woke from a deep sleep wondering why I was so wet and thought I had peed in her bed. But then I realised it had been raining in the night. Later my parents repaired the roof. But by then I was sleeping somewhere else.

The room was huge with no doors and as people passed they could look in. I could hear everything my parents talked about when I was in bed.

I slept in this bed with my three older sisters until they left to get married. Then my parents sent my little sister to share with me.

I didn't like that because my little sister snored. So if they went to bed at the same time, after one minute my sister would fall fast asleep and begin to snore.

Because of this, I couldn't sleep myself, so I would wake my sister up and we would fight into the night. Eventually our mother would come and ask us angrily what the problem was, because we had such a bed big enough for four people and there were only two of us. So why were we fighting?

Eventually it got so bad my mother separated us and I got the room to myself. I was very

happy and enjoyed myself thoroughly. Finally I could sleep this way and that way, I could put her head and her body in any position she wanted. I was very protective of my bed and didn't let any guests come into my room.

Later, when I came to the UK Nass immigration gave me accommodation which had a single bed. A single bed in this country is like a baby cot to us. So a double bed in the UK looked like a single bed to me. In my country, a bed can be any size you want. For example, my mother's bed was so massive that the whole family could all sleep together if they wanted to, especially if my Dad was away. Sometimes we would all pile onto the bed and listen to my mother's stories. It was a beautiful time, oh my God.

But the bed I was given in the UK was so small that I fell out of it every night for three months.

The lady downstairs, Mrs. Bilonda, was so worried, she thought something had happened to me. The first time, she came upstairs and asked:

"What's happened!?" I replied, "The bed is so small I keep falling out!"

"Oh I'm sorry! But why don't you move your bed into the corner, so you can't fall out?" she asked.

I tried but it didn't work because I kept tossing and turning and there just wasn't enough room. Finally, after three months, one of the other ladies in the house she was sharing received her refugee status and left the house. So I took her bed and put it in my own room next to mine. In those days if someone new came to the house the authorities would give them a completely new bed and bedding for hygiene reasons, so I could have her old one.

Now they don't care anymore and people sleep in dirty used beds. In one place where I was sent later with two small children, I was given a mattress which had blood and urine stains on it and curtains which did not even cover the window. I refused to sleep in that disgusting bed and sat up all night for four nights.

Only after Freedom from Torture fought for me was it finally replaced.

About the Author

Joy is originally from The Democratic Republic of Congo. She has been a service user at Freedom from Torture since 2013. She is an enthusiastic singer and writer. She lives in London with her three beautiful children.



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THE MIMBAR

by HASANI

I drifted into a reverie as the imam stood before us on the minbar, intoning *asalam alaykum* before he began his Friday sermon, the khutbah. "Our khutbah today is on jihad..."

The voice of the imam trailed off as I struggled to keep awake. I was having my own jihad as I sat there listening. A morsel of mouldy bread that Friday morning had been my breakfast. Now, by the afternoon my stomach was grumbling and rumbling like a thunderstorm. The air in the near-vacuum could be heard by the person sitting next to me on the floor, ready to let out a noisy/drum roll of a fat if I loosened the valves.

"Jihad is misunderstood", the imam chanted as he stood on the minbar, spitting the sacred words from the scriptures. "Most people think Jihad is fighting against enemies. ...", his singing voice faded away as I drifted into a hunger-induced nap....

... "We should show the world how resilient we are as a people against those who have imposed illegal sanctions on our country, simply for taking back our land from the whites..."

The President continued, standing at the lectern before his party delegates at the meeting of the central committee. "We must tighten our belts to face the continued onslaught of the enemy on our economy. We fought a hard battle to liberate this country from the colonialists: now they are fighting us with the weapons of the economy!" he continued, as his party supporters cheered him on.

Of course, the tightening of belts was the remedy only prescribed to us, the poor unemployed who struggled to put a decent meal on the table. The fat cats aligned to the ruling party had no reason to worry about where their next meal would come from. They

had parcelled out the 'reclaimed' land to each other and had the money, mostly stolen from state coffers, to afford a good living. But there he stood, telling his supporters about the struggles he pretended were his own. "Strike fear into the heart of..."

.... "The most important struggle is the struggle within oneself against sin, and that is the best jihad."

A nudge on my rib cage had brought me back to the sermon from dreamland. Probably as I dozed, the valves had loosened and caused a big bang. Glancing up at the minbar for a moment, I locked eyes with the imam as he stood preaching...

... "It's now time to go to the next object."

The voice of the museum curator started me. I was standing before this majestic minbar at the Victoria and Albert museum. I was caught in a reverie, staring at it. Here, finally, my stomach was full – but the pulpit was empty. The striking wooden structure before me had triggered a flood of mixed memories of home 10,000 miles away.

About the Author

A certain writer once remarked that, 'We tell ourselves stories in order to live.' Having gone through a terrible experience in my country of birth because of my political views, I left it for the UK. Through the 'Write to Life' group I have found a place that helps me to free myself from the turmoil inside.

FATH ALI SHAH PORTRAYED by SHAHAB



© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fath Ali Shah was one of the most glorious kings of the Persian Qajar dynasty in the early 19th century. We may talk about the portrayal of Fath Ali Shah—but it's extremely hard to talk about his character and his role in that dynasty, from this portrait.

What we see is a person making an effort to carve out a bold and strong image of himself, and his dynasty, in our, the onlookers' – minds. But to me, this portrait also reveals how in his own time his enemies may have perceived him as a weak king.

Behold his exquisite clothes, expensively made by hand, with waist, arm, shoulder pads and crown embellished with gold and precious stones: he wears his royal might for all to admire. Does this display of battledress impress his enemies? Imagine him at the head of those advancing lines, as five thousand warring wolves prepare to confront one other; ten thousand glinting eyes as soldiers display their bristling sword-tip claws, their razor-sharp teeth.

See how this portrait persuades me that its subject wants to prove to me how powerful and rich he is; and also that he deserves to be the King.

Those stones on his clothing are meant to work on my mind at a deep level.

How many battles did he win? What were the spoils? How far and often did he venture in his attempts to colonise other countries with his armies?

When I look at those golden armbands, I'm supposed to think he's always at the ready to

defend his own country, even when he is dressed in these luxurious 'indoor' clothes.

And when I look at his long beard, it will set me to wonder how many times they advised him, "Keep that kindly baby face if yours away from your enemies".

Maybe wearing a long beard was a way of telling that this is a person who could be violent as well as resilient and brave – or perhaps it was just the contemporary Qajar style or tradition.

Underneath all the show, I feel there are big contradictions in the way Fath Ali Shah dresses up, with those elegant limbs and his long beard that speaks of hidden fears.

And more: this distinctive king sends out a mysterious message to the viewer – like Leonardo Da Vinci's painted codes. What is the message of this painting? Can you imagine why someone would pose with one hand grasping the sharp point of a knife, while the fingers of his other hand gently hold one soft flower from the elegant arrangement? The world of contrasts? The logic that there can be no Good without Evil?

Most likely he would wish to convey this message:

"Don't judge me from body with its elegant limbs. Although when you see how I hold the top of my sharpened knife, I have the character of a fighter, I can also be the tenderest person."

I look into his bold, penetrating eyes, wondering if he imagines an optimistic future for his dynasty and his bloodline.

About the Author

Shahab is 32 years old. Before, he was a political journalist and activist, while at the same time teaching the violin and performing widely. After his arrest during the failed Green revolution against the regime, he decided to flee Iran, take his life in his hands and stay in the UK.



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TIPSY FLOWERS IN A GARDEN

by ASO

It's an 18th century garden in Isfahan, Iran, in the middle of spring. There are six, lively women, celebrating. They are drinking wine, feasting on fruit and are surrounded by various colourful attendants. They are beautifully made up with eye shadow, face powder, eyebrow pencils and lip gloss and wear gorgeous dresses. The party is just for them, no one else, but they have deliberately made themselves look as attractive as possible. The women's beauty, their lavish dresses, are an important part of the picture.

But they are tipsy. The fact that they are depicted drinking wine enthusiastically makes the painting extraordinary. They are drinking secretly. No men remain in the garden, they have all gone. Maybe they've marched off to war or somewhere else. This is not the women's concern, they are free from men's eyes. None of the women have made themselves attractive for any men, and no one cares about anything outside the world of the garden. The monarchs of Persia are either going to rule the world or lose their empires – it doesn't matter to them. The women are enjoying themselves, it's a happy day and, clearly, they are slightly drunk, but this is just the beginning.

It is going to be a long, beautiful day. The dancing will begin soon. There will be more drinking and the weather will become warmer in the afternoon, so the women will remove their clothes. Then the entire atmosphere will change; the flowery, spring day will become hot, romantic, and sweet. Unfortunately, the artist painted just the beginning of the day. They are all aware that had the artist painted more there would have been trouble.

About the Author

I am a writer from Iraq and I joined 'Write to Life' four years ago. I write to express my feelings about different colours, which belong to everything in human feeling, like pain and pleasure.

A PIECE OF EMBROIDERY

by SHEILA



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I love knitting, and am learning about different forms of needlework and embroidery. I appreciate the dedication, deep awareness – and also pleasure – spent on producing something very lovely, involving so many hours of concentration. Once you have achieved it, you can see how it would transform the whole appearance of an otherwise dull environment. This

piece would bring the humblest room alive. Probably intended as bed-hangings for a richer home, I like to think it was put in a child's bedroom so that when that child has left the nest and then returns, these embroidered bed-hangings will open pages of fond memories, and perhaps for a parent, too.

The beauty and elegance from the blending of colours and repeat patterns may just be fabric, but to me this embroidery has a life of its own. Although the flowers are stylised, exotic, they are clearly based on Nature: I love it when real plants intertwine to produce something magical and amazing, as with this work. It's a flawless piece – such fine stitching, so meticulously done, that you cannot ever tell where the different wools are joined.

Also, I can imagine waking up after having a nightmare and then opening my eyes to the vibrant flowers and calming vertical rhythms of this beautiful work. Here in the UK I have discovered knitting and I find it therapeutic to blend colours together so that different shades of wool are 'fluid'; this soothes me, and at the same time excites me. I now have a hunger to venture into trying embroidery myself.

This work of embroidery, made in India, was intended to appeal to people across the world, in England. My mind can really appreciate and respect different cultures, and how knowing them can change lives, including my own. I think also of the support I've been given here.

About the Author

I was born and grew up in beautiful Zimbabwe. After 1980, when Zimbabwe gained independence things seemed to be going on well, but later I was put in a very difficult and dangerous situation. In 2013 I fled to the UK where I joined Freedom from Torture in 2017. Being a part of such a loving, caring, warm-hearted family has changed my life so much.



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THE ARDABIL CARPET

by HAYDEH RAVESH

I first saw this magnificent carpet many years ago, on a school outing with my students to the Victoria & Albert Museum. This was when I was teaching in London, year 5 at the Iranian Supplementary School. In one lesson, we learned about carpets in Iran and the craft of carpet-making. Among the famous carpets mentioned was the Ardabil carpet, so-called from the name of a city in north-western Iran and a showpiece of the V&A's Persian collection.

When I visited the museum recently, our group heard about the history of the carpet and its journey to the V&A. I was reminded of my own destiny: from my very different situation in Iran before my journey to this country, and then having to begin a completely new life here.

The Ardabil carpet was originally two carpets, made for a palatial hall or reception room. These large 'twin' carpets were of unique design, the pile woven from silk on a lambswool base. Somehow they were abandoned – left rolled up in a dark, damp corner of a large shrine where they were badly damaged. Found eventually by a German trader, the pair was brought to the UK. Specialist repairers were able to use the more damaged carpet to complete and renew the one in better condition.

I feel that, like me, the carpet was made from strong, wonderful material; it was wrought in rich, complex patterns. In its young days it was cared for in the home of a well-to-do family; I was brought up by committed and kind parents; their main concerns being to support my comfort and my studies, so I could have a decent and independent life when I grew up. But it too was then shut away in a darkened prison cell for five years, where I was badly treated – you could call it 'care' of the worst standard. My life there was never without anxiety. I was regularly and cruelly beaten, sometimes with a harsh black lash, or trampled by heavy boots. My physical and mental states were damaged, my spirit almost broken.

Through being here in Britain, I've received support, especially from Freedom from Torture, where many wounded people are treated kindly.

If we are believed in, upheld and restored, we can gain back our confidence and happiness. The Ardabil carpet and I were both lucky to survive and gain 'refugee status' here in Britain. We are alive, treated courteously and able to contribute to this society. Now happy and content, we're once more allowed to flourish in similar circumstances to those of our young lives, far away from those neighbouring towns of north-western Iran.

About the Author

Haydeh was born in Iran and studied Sociology at the University of Tehran. She was involved in the 1979 revolution and, as a supporter of the 'Fadaiaean Organisation', was arrested in 1983 and spent over five years in Evin Prison. Haydeh emigrated to Britain in 1991, took an MA course in Social Policy and a postgrad in teaching in London, and is grateful to be able to concentrate on writing about her life.

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