

BWANA

Thomas Asher

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'Those who only know hurt, who cannot stay with their own thoughts and feelings, always defend against the hostile and rejecting image, because they could not be the ideal self that others expected them to be - and can only put into unadaptive drama their self's struggle to survive.'

Thomas Skead

Bwana

We are sitting in the front row of the church. My ex-wife sits next to me, looking classy in a knitted outfit, soft and delicious as poured chocolate. On the contrary I am tense and on edge, my neck muscles feel tight as iron ropes. On my left are my two sons, the youngest with his wife. My ex sits next to me and on her right are her son and his wife to be. My family. My children. Or those that are left. I know that behind me sit my brothers and their wives and all their children, with judging eyes. I am glad my ex is here and that she looks calm. Her support of me must show them that it can't be me who is the bad one. They like and respect her, so at least they will be puzzled about her being here at all – and that gives me some satisfaction. To keep from suffocating on my own breath I turn over the order of service card and read the hymn. On this side in addition to the hymns is a photograph, depicting a sunset filtering through tall poplar trees, scraggy and skeletal as the rays of the winter Highveld sun slant through their branches and reflect off the surface of a dam in the foreground. This was to be his final resting-place, said a caption below, after the cremation.

Apparently he had been to this farm often and had asked for his ashes to be spread on these waters. I didn't know anything about this or who owned the farm or who his friends were, only that he had felt peaceful there. I hadn't spoken to him or heard from him in more than two years. His brothers and cousin had gone out there to meet the owner, to take the photograph and print this for the service today, all within the last three days. They included the poem they had found in his apartment and because it was in his handwriting they assumed he had written it.

'It makes me cry,' you said.

'It means you are alive,' said I,

'Too bad that to become a butterfly,

Means a field full of goodbye.'

'So this is goodbye?' you said.

'There's no need to cry,' said I.

This short poem was printed on the card for his funeral service, with a recent photograph of him, dressed in a black tee shirt and training pants, smiling at the camera, his well-toned and sculpted arms folded on his chest. *No need to cry?* I'll say! I have spent my life trying not to cry and getting him not to cry. And now we should all contain ourselves and I should go on with my life? When he has added to my grief, knowing as he did better than anyone on this earth the intensity of such pain? If only I knew how to do this of all most difficult chores, I would.

How not to cry? How to shed a skin so thick and tough, how be rid of this layer cultivated over decades of control and fastidious attention to detail? Yes, of course if *I could I would*, whatever the consequences to others. If I *only knew how*, I would do it – whoever I had to leave behind writhing in grief.

'*Just Do It*,' the adverts on the billboards along the highway proclaim. I wish. But I can't! I am solid. Cast in stone.

He apparently, according to his friends, regularly wrote poetry. Something more I did not know about him. '*The Boxer Poet*', the notice in the newspaper had said. '*You were the smartest, kindest, most generous person we knew.*' This was from his close friends, who crossed continents to be at his funeral. They thought he had written the poem that day, after he had been out with his friends in his brand new, expensive German car and they supposed that then he sat down at the ultra modern stainless steel table in his perfectly appointed townhouse and put the gun to his heart and pulled the trigger.

I try not to let the woe-is-me attitude show and I think I succeed. And yet. And yet. All the not-so-subtle comments from others seem to imply that I should not think of myself as the victim; that I have not suffered as much as the others have; as much as he had. They, and all those sitting behind me in righteous pose, don't begin to understand what it is like to be a parent to complex and talented children. They could not know what it was like for my children to be spoiled by my efforts and demands and then to be sucked into a nightmare world of their mothers' instability and history.

My brothers would, of course, be too terrified to attempt genuine empathy, lest they catch this fateful germ. And once infected they would have to experience this reality I now suffer, in which the safety of your children is as fragile as the filament of light bulb. My brothers can't conceive of such a world, preferring to think of themselves and their children as immortal, by virtue of their righteous credentials. I was like that too, once upon a time, life times ago yet here at this third burial I fail to understand the allegedly Christian minds of my brothers, who stand aloof from all my anguish, staring in judgment, withholding their concern.

Not that I want their sympathy! I don't, but I need reassurance that I am not blamed, that I did not cause these three to do what they did to themselves. I expect and long for some understanding, for someone to take the initiative without holding it against me later, to thank me and appreciate me and to help me soothe the agony I am suffering in several hells.

Instead, after the service at the tea, my brothers stand shoulder to shoulder in front of me and start preaching and offering to pray for me. I go blank and wait there like a dumb animal ready for the slaughter until they finish. Their arguments and their prayers! I hang on by a thread to my rage through the tea time of pretended consolation, suspended like raw meat being slowly grilled high up on the *braai* where the flames slowly lick and singe my flesh. I think I say thank you. Or I hold my tongue and from the neck down I numb out every reaction. I cant keep the memory exactly as it happened because I fail to find any connection between what they are saying and my pain. Their virtuous jabberings bring no comfort. I stand like a burn victim whose flesh is still cooking long after the fire has been extinguished, while my agony continues to sizzle.

I ache to live in a place where I am entitled to soak up all that is good without the prolonged pain of guilt and torment. I ask myself what I could expect to look forward to from my brothers and two remaining sons. Could these meagre rations, given at funerals and weddings, sustain me and fill that empty place to banish this anguish? I need to believe that finally, somewhere, somehow I can establish a balance between the chaos

of my inner world and the neat, controlled exterior that I present to all who live beyond my skin.

As my brothers blather on I cannot swallow, so I look away from their faces and disregard what they say. Looking back now it seems a part of me got lost. That part of me that no longer hungers for what is withheld or what is not satisfying. I long for spontaneous words that are warm and real and not the clichés like, 'I'll pray for you.' Or, 'Repent and take the Lord into your heart.' Fuck them! I need more than that to satisfy this angry appetite. I long to join the human race again and not have to hide from their prying eyes in the shadows, where the conflict fuels my anger.

I find a lot of comfort living in this silence. Here the stillness contains me and the pain cannot expand. I am left in peace and there is no competition. Only with myself and that's tough enough! Being here for ten days in a community of almost thirty strangers allows me to be solitary in a measure of comfort. The silence prevents anyone 'caring' or complaining; nor can his or her curiosity be satisfied by pesky and I think intrusive questions. It is not like being at home because even if I am alone back there I remain responsible for so much, whereas here, for the moment at least, I am not answerable to anyone but myself.

In everyday life I manage to relate only to those who do not touch my pain. Those who ask, cling, demand, blame or dig in goddamn curiosity about who I am, who I am related to and what I *do* – annoy me! I avoid personal discussions because every conversation inevitably leads to the past and even the lightest reminder of my losses is a trigger to a depth of pain that has no words to describe it. Being solitary and wordless is a high price to pay I suppose but I pay it because I have persuaded myself that tragedy of such proportions must be the fault of one person. Me. Just me. I am to blame, I think, as if all other causes and conditions did not apply. As if I was bad enough and responsible enough to single

handedly bring so much destruction and sorrow on myself and my family. Consequently I live in this limbo, unable to weep, unable to allow myself the luxury of any release.

I have a reputation now... I am the *he*, the widower who has had two suicides in his family. People have told other people in hushed voices about my dramas, and in a chain reaction of alarm they feel obliged to *follow up* and say something sympathetic, something memorable. They want to tell their friends how they coped with me; or they want to cover the gaping social chasm that has dreadfully opened up in front of them.

Back at home, in my small remaining social circle or at work, people try to chat and engage me in meaningless conversation where inevitably they stumble across difficult words about death. Worse, they sometimes say dumb things like, '*Why?*' as if I should know; or 'Did she tell you she was going to do it?' only to see my face tighten and close and then the conversation peters out because I don't say anything at all in response. You would be surprised how often death, dying and suicide are mentioned in the ordinary conversation of those people who wander into this territory ill-equipped to cope with a sudden turn of events.

Various people react in different ways to the unhappy dimensions of my fate. Some are just baldly curious. Their curiosity isn't always about the details of the deaths, but having gotten a whiff of tragedy they want to test-drive their horror and understand how to differentiate themselves from me. They want to be as unlike me as possible; they don't want to identify with someone they regard as strict or arrogant or dangerous to know. In a panic they imagine that the condition of extreme pain might be contagious, so if they find any similarities between us they want to reassure themselves that, should it be necessary, they could cope, escape and recover from such a complex predicament as mine.

Some gasp in what I assume they intend as a kind of empathy or they sigh out all the air in their lungs at one go. Others let their facial features sag in horror and flounder in their efforts to say the right thing and then realising that they can't reach into my mind, or know the depth of this nightmare, they become mute and move away. A few show compassion as best they can and try to briefly inhabit with me the fragile world we

share and repeat, 'I am so sorry. I am so sorry,' over and over until they choke on their words.

Although on the surface my mood appears untroubled, any nosiness, preaching or righteous advice will provoke an irate flow that liquefies, hot and deadly, to pour over the unfortunate person trying to change me or burrow into my life. I guard myself against those who attempt to sneak into my world by dint of concern or curiosity when they pretend to console me while rooting about like hogs, sniffing out rumour and gossip. In their comments I find immediate cause to react with varying degrees of rudeness and I lose my temper like a rhinoceros trapped between my awkwardly familiar horror and their blatant prying. In the flurry of confusion at my sudden shift in mood they forget what they intended to say and flee, afraid and uncertain about how they set off this cascade of anger. After such an outburst I walk away feeling empty of emotion and able for a while to maintain an outer calm again.

Last week we, my three sons and I, were all at home for a few minutes as our lives intersected briefly like lines on a drawing board and I happened to be silent and unsmiling. My boys asked me if I was sulking or feeling sorry for myself. I made gruff noises, primitive communications which indicate that I accept this kind of question but only from them. It is our style of teasing, jibing and peppering each other up. We four manage never to mention the past. It is how we show concern and perhaps affection. But tactlessly in their enthusiasm men who have known me for years will wander away from a technical discussion about the proportions of a mining shaft to casually raise the subject of my children. One idiot, imagining himself a jolly bloke, mentioned a car I had years ago. Insensitive as jagged glass, he linked the conversation to my family, remarking how long ago I filled my vehicle with my children *'like lots and lots of Jelly Tots.'* His wife, seeing my face, steered the topic quickly in another direction and the conversation fizzled out followed by a long and strained pause.

Another alleged friend asked quite cheerfully about a vehicle that my son had wrecked. I was surprised that he would go there without comprehending that the rehashed memories of those close shaves with mortality provoked a frantic anxiety in me. I pointedly changed the

subject. He seemed bewildered by my refusal to elaborate endlessly about the damage to the car, my son's injuries and the hospital costs. I stared blankly at him and he gave me an '*Are you nuts?*' look. I resolved immediately never to see him or his family again. Sustaining that kind of social chit-chat means I have to summon the energy to cope and discuss my children with these people who are now strangers! So I avoid them. I must cut out the past and I do not want to think or talk about it ever again.

I was in a dark space on the day, now nearly ten years ago, when I first saw my next wife. I had forced myself to sleep through the previous night, helped only by a sleeping pill and the natural sounds I heard whispering in the heavy air outside. I found it comforting to be in silence where there were no human voices to rupture the stillness. From the distance rhythmic Zulu drumming finally lulled me into something resembling ease. I woke slowly and almost peacefully the next morning, hearing the '*Piet-my-Vrou*' bird, in Zulu the *titihoya* bird named for his repetitive call, which sounds as if he is plaintively nagging for his wife, saying '*Come here, wife! Come here, wife!*'

The forest has almost two hundred bird species and was given recognition as a National Heritage Site by Nelson Mandela because of its conversion from a neglected, eroded farm into a paradise of indigenous trees, wildflowers, tree-ferns, rare wild orchids and, of course, birds. Part of the reason I come here is to watch and photograph birds, preferring their company and the carping call of the *titihoya* to the curiosity and shape shifting assault of people meddling.

On that day I did not feel on the edge of tears as I often do. Tears that have to be countered, swallowed or hidden. I felt accommodated by the forest. The sounds and the tang of the fresh, still space contained me. The scent of the pine found its way into my mind and sealed its memory into a secret recess. I knew that this sense of home, of safety and of belonging would be undisturbed if I kept it locked away where no one else could enter, where these treasures could be buried as a resource for a future date. That is, if I should ever *have* a future.

In the crisp morning air someone was practicing a long horned pipe in the distance. I spotted a pair of blue swallows, dipping and soaring, their long tails streaming behind them as they floated above the forest, their summer residence. The repeating sounds of the pipe lobbied back and forth across the valley to create an orchestration of notes that did not blot out the call of the birds in the high trees or the twittering of those nearby. The music eased itself like smoke around the trees and filled the space that guarded me with its presence to softly occupy the air above the entire forest and the daisy spangled grasses.

I wondered who was making the music, knowing that all sorts of oddities come to find sanctuary in a place like this. I told myself it was probably some tormented musician getting away from it all; as I was. It sounded like an Indian horn but I am only vaguely acquainted with foreign music. When I am in my car or alone at home I prefer to mask unwelcome voices or any stray thoughts with the rhythmic bump of voiceless jazz, but despite my skepticism about and my resistance to people, the mantra of the music was seeping through me.

My tense muscles melted slightly and the sounds began to fill a magical place in the natural order of things. It seemed, amidst these smells and deep archaic noises, impossible to be burdened and heavy hearted. The sun was dispersing the mist now as it touched the greenery and brought the shape of the trees back into clear focus; branches, leaves and whole shapes merging into sight, back from the gentle mystery of the haze. I spent long minutes standing on the lip of the hill as the day brightened, seeing the sky gradually change colours, streaked with blues and gold and a variation of soft pinks, as it brought a warmth to my skin. Now for a miniscule amount of time I was suspended above all the sorrow and pain of my life and able simultaneously to be attentive to a vast expanse of the world around me and my own solitary existence.
