

1342 Belvedere

R. Kihara Odanga

| Kenya | USA |

I want to say three things quickly then I shut up; because the people who live across the street have a gun, because God has nothing to say to me, because this place is trying to flay me. And so, I am tired; tired of the tiredness that I have taken up for myself because of these three things. Tired of waiting—the weight of waiting for all this disquiet to quiet is enormous and I must find a way to stand above it before it takes over. For somewhere, everywhere in my head, these things: these three, run around like rats in a darkened kitchen, sometimes even crashing into each other and making me shriek in an uncontrollable anguish, and fear of an odd sort. Making a mockery of peace. Now every song I let dance on my tongue, between the roof of my mouth and my lips, every tone I hum is a hymn against fear.

The people who live across the street have a gun. I have never seen it. In the few months I have lived here on 1342 Belvedere Avenue, I have never seen it, and nobody has ever told me that they do. I do not know it for a fact, and yet I know it to be true. The little boy with blonde hair, who likes to thrash about wildly in the inflatable pool his greying father fills up in the front yard in the summertime: he probably strokes it every day at noon. He likely holds it in his small, pink-knuckled hands the same way he would hold a crayon at any other time. He points it to the wall—the gun, or to his toys, Captain America, Ironman, Kevin the Minion, Spiderman. “Pew pew!” he shoots at Black Panther. Killing the king.

The little girl in a blue dress, who dances in the bubbles her mother blows out from a soapy bottle, she probably invites the gun to her tea parties. And it sits there, at the head of the

table, near Barbie, Elsa the Queen, and all the plastic crockery; leaden and unyielding. And sips pretend tea with her. The feverish, freckled woman who sits on the porch, I suppose she holds it every evening as she does the washing and wipes it trustingly with a dampened dish cloth first. Then the plates, the forks, the potato masher, the wineglasses. And on the nights her greying husband is away, I'm sure she takes it in her hands before she sleeps, slips it under the cotton pillow and crawls into bed with the lead under her head: a headrest. The man, he caresses the gun, more than he does his freckled wife, brings it up to his face near his greying temples and squints one eye as he stares lengthwise down its barrel. It is one of his many confidences, so he holds it —lovingly.

I have never seen the gun. But that does not mean I can walk along the sidewalk outside their house across 1342 Belvedere Ave. It might well be that the first and only time I see it, will be after it has stared violently at my matterless life and I am laying on the ground crimsoning the tarmac around me. So, I do not walk along that side of the street. And when I sit outside in the sun, and the boy thrashes around in the pool, the girl squeals in glee, the wife reprimands, and the man grunts, I do not raise my eyes at them. Although, if I find my eyes flying in their direction, I do not let them linger. For who would want to look a people with a gun in the eyes for too long?

God has nothing to say to me. He has a lot of explaining to do, but I do not want to hear it. He picked his side —what a luxury! There was that woman on the bus, who came and sat in the seat in front of mine. And when the bus began to move, turned to face me.

“You know, Jesus wanted slavery to end.”

“What?”

“Slavery. Y'know, slaves? He didn't like it.”

Okay. Then why did he stop it? Let me agree that he is the one who stopped it. I have always been taught that he hates murder, theft, and alcoholism. What about poverty? He hates that as well. And suffering. The things he does “not like” seem to be the things that are the most

prevailing. The ones he loves on the other hand; those disappear quicker: like morality, and love, and well-ordered societies where people do not get shot for looking a certain way or talking a certain way or being poor. Or slavery. If he really did not like it, as this woman said, it would still be here with us today. And isn't it? I do not know enough to say. Perhaps it is.

But that is not even why I have a problem with what she said. Even as the bus moved, she started muttering under her breath. Praying, I suppose. I doubt her God and mine would have anything to say to each other. I have often thought of how her Bible starts with the Triumphant Entry, but for some reason, mine starts —and ends, in the chattel slavery before the Exodus. And then Moses never comes. And if he does, he is shot dead before he can part any sea. Can you think of the thousands making the Twilight Trek to the Red Sea? And when they get there, does it ever part? No. So now there is a sea standing before us: the waters. And behind us, Pharaoh's great whitening armies, to drag us back to the freedom of building their nations. Or they will march into our countries uninvited: a triumphant entry enacting violence on the audience of our blackened minds. I have to take it that that is the will of Jesus for a wretched soul like mine. Her God! What would he have to say to me now that he has chosen the purified to be white as snow? Pharaoh's whitening armies. Here, I will explain.

This place is trying to flay me. No. This place would prefer it if I flayed myself. For its freedom and safety. Again, I am standing at a bus stop (perhaps I should stop with this bus business altogether). Standing at a bus stop to go to Belvedere Ave., this lady standing near me wants to know if the bus will take long to come.

"It should be here in the next ten minutes."

"Ah! I hear some African in your accent. Where're you from?"

"Nairobi."

"I thought that was some Swahili in there."

Kiswahili. Have I in my entire life ever met an actual Swahili? I shouldn't think so. Never mind, never matter.

"I'm from Ghana. But I've been here long enough, so I'm now American. You should take the opportunities here. There are many. I came for Grad school from Ghana and I never left. Africa has so many problems. We have a chance to make it here. And you know we Black people, we have to work harder here and stick together."

The bus arrived.

I'm seated. Two stops later, she taps my back and hands me a yellow sticky note:

240-6032958

Marya

*If you want to join
the Navy*

I get off the bus.

It is time for these three things to start colliding in my head like rats in a darkened kitchen. I do not want to join the Navy. But she provided the option to me so genuinely, so innocently, as a cure to my problem. The problem being my not having stayed here long enough to lose the 'Swahili' in my accent and become American. She has with her the cure for my Africanness—my blackness, the Navy. And she hopes I am willing to take the drug. Three doses of Navy for you sir! There is a reason one would join the navy of a place they have no real allegiance to. What was that thing Warsan Shire said? "When home is the mouth of a shark." I suppose she thinks she is doing for me what she wishes someone had done for her.

So now here I am, in a place where my problems have been epidermalised. And they are big problems. I walk around fearing that everyone around me has a gun. I only walk along lawns that have BIDEN-HARRIS posters on them; I have decided there is some safety there. And

my safety from a sort of slavery, is in Jesus. Whom I have never met. But I must be sure hates slavery to no end. Why? Because the woman on the bus said so. And then now, if my life is to get any better, I might want to join the Navy. Cure myself of my 'African-ness', probably lose the accent and begin, quite dedicatedly, to peel my skin off and present myself, flayed, before the Navy. It has been months since May. Since the boy next door sent me a text message: This video is so sad. With a link to the final eight minutes and forty-six seconds of a man's life. Months since my mother called, frantic.

"What about the virus?"

"Mum don't worry. I'm staying indoors; I'm not going outside. It's too cold to be outside anyway."

"And the police? Don't get into trouble. I hear all Americans have guns, right?"

"Mum, honestly. I don't go outside. I don't cause trouble. And I'm in a safe neighbourhood. Please stop worrying. My classmates said Maryland isn't that bad. And they live here so they'd know."

"Okay. Don't get in trouble. Leave those people alone. Let them do what they want with their country. You go to school and come back."

The summer has come and gone. And despite the changes, the fears and the songs remain the same. So, I walk humming my hymns against fear.

I am walking back to 1342 Belvedere Ave., to sit on the porch in the thin autumn sun. I only walk along the lawns with flapping blue BIDEN-HARRIS signs littered across them. Or the others, the ones that go,

IN THIS HOUSE, WE BELIEVE:
BLACK LIVES MATTER
WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

NO HUMAN IS ILLEGAL
SCIENCE IS REAL
LOVE IS LOVE
KINDNESS IS EVERYTHING

I cross the street when there are neither. Or when I see someone in a red hat walking towards me. If I get home I will sit on the porch. And stare, for a hot second, across the street at my neighbours, for I believe they have a gun. There. I have said my three things so I will shut up: the people who live across the street have a gun, God has nothing to say to me, this place is trying to get me to flay myself.
