

Consensus

Volume 28
Issue 2 *Spirituality and Health*

Article 12

11-25-2002

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Recommended Citation

Jensen, Ruth E. (2002) "We Wait to Welcome You," *Consensus*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol28/iss2/12>

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We Wait To Welcome You

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Text: Matthew 25:35-36

“...I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

*Black eyes in a black pinched face
he stares at his feet, in oversize runners,
at the end of long, bamboo thin legs.
He barely eats enough to keep body and soul together.*

*Why are you here, Somalian man?
Black Somalian man, barely sixteen years old —
Why did you run away?*

*How did you come to this country? Who helped you?
A quiet sob shudders through the thin, sloped shoulders.*

Part One

There was no food; we had no lights; the water was gone.

I don't know who they were, but
they came in the night,
screaming with guns and knives
and dragged us out of the house.

Mamma tried to protect me but they pushed her away and hit her with their guns.

Friends, neighbours, weeping, wailing, dying in the streets.

Arms and legs hacked from bodies.

Lying at odd angles in congealed blood.

My brother was lucky. He died that night.

The others died slowly, one at a time.
I've been dying ever since.

They bombed the house; we ran into the night.
Anywhere and nowhere. We ran.
Exhausted, we crawled into an old bus; three boys and me.
Night time noise, rifle shots, bombs, confusion.
Dreaming? Awake? Nothing real.

My eyes open to see a gun pointed at my chest.
I begin to cry, "No, please God, no!
No more! No!"
His trigger finger itches, but he turns and walks away.

Black eyes melting with tears,
noses pressed to the dirty bus window,
three young black boys, spirits dying,
watch in hollow wonder as the gunman empties our bullets
into a man and woman on the street.

Part Two

Childhood ripped from our guts by people we don't even know.
Exhausted, weary to the bone. Sleep comes where we drop.
Who are these people who stalk our lives with bombs and guns?
Where did they come from? Why doesn't someone stop them?

Where, in this rat-infested place of torment is Mamma?
Where is my sister, my brothers? Where is our cat?
Where did you all go?

I feel so alone in this hell that was once home.

Mamma,
your ebony arms used to hold me so safely.
Snuggled in your lap in the late afternoon shade,
the cat purring in my ear...
In the sleepy heat the flies swoop in lazy circles
and try to drink the sweat from our faces and arms.
Your huge, no longer white, hanky
swings languidly in their direction.

In dreamy, purring contentment

the sleeping cat pushes his claws in and out of my pant leg.
Is he dreaming of prey to be caught and savoured?

The fragrance of boiling meat rises in slow, steamy wafts into the
afternoon silence.

The big boys and Father will be home when the shop closes.

The screen door slams and sister's footsteps bounce across the floor
into the afternoon stillness.

Part Three

I am so hungry. So tired of running..

Today there was no food at the restaurant.

We cannot work there any longer...

There is no hope.

Three boys and me find an old car and drive to Kenya.

Why are those cars on the side of the road?

Gunmen! Gunmen are blocking the road!

Terror tangles our guts.

Bullets rain.

Oh God, please help us! We are going to die!

An explosion of blood...

The driver's head crashes onto the steering wheel.

The car careens in a crazy dance across the road.

The gunmen lunge toward the trees as the out of control vehicle meets
its destiny.

The door jerks open.

"Who are you? Is your father a Minister?"

"No, no, we are from Yemen."

The lie slides off my tongue without a pause.

The gunman grabs my neck and pulls me from the car.

"Who are you?"

I do not answer. He laughs and pushes me away.

The quarter moon slices the night sky

and lights the puffs of dust stirred by our tired feet.

Two of us lay in the bushes today as a third tried to find food and water.

It was too dangerous.

Another day without food.

Into the night stillness the question comes,

How long can humans live without water?

Part Four

We must escape this place of death. There will be a way.

I hear there are ships carrying passengers to Kenya.

I hear they are over-loaded; many sink.

I hear, later, my Mother died in such a ship.

We run out of water and are forced to drink sea water;
many sicken and die.

Their bloated bodies join the eternal seas.

Their pain is finished. They can rest.

Kenya to Ethiopia to friends who helped.

“You want to leave Africa?

Go to Nepal. No other country will take us.

Go to Nepal.”

Part Five

The airplane jet engines groan in protest at the weight carried in its belly.

Well-fed passengers;

their over-weight luggage.

Their business dreams and ideas less than credible

ride the honeymoon special into exotic Kathmandu.

*With them is one whisper-thin Somalian, not yet a man,
carrying only hope,*

false travel documents,

a shoulder bag with donated clothes,

some donated money,

and a knot in his stomach.

The laden passengers spill out onto the tarmac,

pushing and jostling to be first in line at the Immigration Desk.

*For the moment they forget it will be an hour, possibly more,
before their luggage rolls off the carousel.*

Part Six

I wait, my gut twisted in agony, I am almost last in line.

Do I look Ethiopian?

Will they understand my Grade Eight English?

The lines seem so confusing. Am I in the right place?

“Give me your documents,” the official snaps.

“Where is your visa, man?

Why didn’t you fill out an application?”

What does he mean? I have a passport!

What visa? What application?

A hasty conference in rapid Nepali stalls the immigration process.

An American back-packer moves closer to the counter
to see what is taking place.

“Why are you here?” the untidy official shouts.

“How did you come to this country? Who helped you?

Why are you black? Did you forget to wash?”

Laughter ripples.

“Did you run away?”

What is he talking about? I don’t understand.

Men with guns stride purposefully toward the desk.

My passport! They are taking my passport!

They grab my arm. I am being dragged away...

Where? Why?

My heart and soul scream...

“Oh God, no! Not here! Not now!

I don’t know anyone. I can’t speak the language.

They don’t understand my English.”

Part Seven

I am going to die in this foreign hell-hole with no window
and cold sweat running off its stone walls.

There is no toilet; sometimes I use a plastic bag,

sometimes the corner.
Nobody comes to clean.

Sometimes they bring watery lentils and rice, sometimes water.
Sometimes nothing.

They took my money, my clothes, my passport.
I have nothing. I am finished.

There is no hope. There is no God. There is no purpose in living.
Why was I even born?
I wish I had died at home.
At least there it was warm and I could understand what they
are saying.

I don't understand why they beat us.
They hit and kick all the prisoners who don't have money.
Yesterday they took my blanket and mattress.
Strange how easy it is to sleep when there is no food.
They say black skin means evil lives inside.
Can this be true?
I am black, but everyone at home is black.
I have never kicked or killed anyone.
Too much that I don't understand.
Too much killing, too much hatred, too much pain.
God, let it be finished.

Part Eight

“Black man, Black man, hurry, hurry.
Wake up! Wake up!
There is someone to see you.
Wash! You cannot go anywhere like that!”

What can you mean? Someone to see me?
I don't know anyone. What does this mean?

“The UN is here and there is a woman from that Church.
Hurry up; they can't see you like this.”
The guard pushes me to the wall, the rifle butt in my face.
“If you tell them what happens in here
there will be no food and no mattress for a week.”

I stumble out, the door clangs behind me.

There has been too much that I don't want to remember.

No, I will not tell your dark secrets of torture.

Not today, anyway.

Part Nine

*Half a world away the fax machine rolls out a hand-printed note
in broken English.*

A message of hope.

"Dear Mamma Ruth, today my papers come.

*I remember it take two years, but Mamma,
today the papers come...."*

Hope and life renewed.

Yesterday receding.

"Mamma, today the papers come...."

Somalian man, now twenty-two:

shoulders squared, head held high,

beautiful ebony skin gleaming in the Himalayan sunlight:

We wait to welcome you!

*We wait to welcome you.**