

## “Solomon”: Terror and *Terroir*

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### Abstract

‘Solomon’ is a new work of short fiction, set in the United Kingdom and northern Uganda. It explores themes of memory, violence and recovery through the consciousness of a young Ugandan man. The accompanying essay “Solomon”: Terror and *Terroir*’ reflects upon the genesis and writing of the story in the context of *Terroir*, a new book-length collection of fiction, with emphasis on depictions of violence and the relationship between the notion of *terroir* and human psychology.

### Keywords

consciousness

fiction

morality

psychology

Uganda

violence

## **‘Solomon’**

*Whereas my father laid upon you a heavy yoke, so shall I add tenfold thereto.*

*Whereas my father chastised you with whips, so shall I scourge you with scorpions.*

(Kings 1, 12:11)

A wave hit the pier and exploded, hurling a plume of foam against the sky and chasing it down the stonework to collapse into the sea. They came in succession, sideways to the pier and the lighthouse at its tip, huge columns of spume that hit with a deep, dull thud that was part sound, part vibration. There was a rusted tramway set into the stone. The old iron was flaking away under salt water and salt air. Opposite this arm of the harbour was another pier with an identical lighthouse. There would be identical tram tracks, the same decay of iron and stone. What had once been becoming what is.

A series of archways cemented into the cliff on the harbour’s north side had been colonised by seagulls and rock doves. A small hawk with barred plumage and one tail feather missing hunted over the scrubland above, its wings quivering against the sea-wind, its head swivelling from side to side. Slim-winged gulls with forked tails and black caps sidled into the wind then dropped to the waves as if entering slits. A pied duck bobbed with its head tucked between its shoulders, seemingly asleep. In the village there had been hammerkop birds that built big unruly nests in trees near the river. The village kids sometimes put a piece of red cloth on a nest and the parent birds would exhaust themselves scooping water from the river to put out the fire. That

was cruel. There had been crested cranes, even shoebills, treading the marshland where the river widened.

A team of women wearing yellow life vests was launching a rowing boat in the harbour, laughing as they struggled against the swell that wrenched them off balance. On the horizon, almost lost in bands of grey where sea and sky merged, a car ferry was heading for Norway. Behind them was the town with its blackened church spire and pubs and charity shops and ex-servicemen's club and empty days where people carried on somehow.

Solomon bent down to his mother, touching her shoulder. As he stooped, he noticed that one of his shoelaces had frayed.

– Enough?

She didn't speak.

– Enough, now, eh?

Then, almost whispering, her lips dried by the wind.

–Yes.

Then, half rising and sinking again to find some comfort.

– Enough. Let us go back.

Solomon lifted his mother's twisted feet back onto the wheelchair's swivelling supports. Her legs were like wood. He checked her hands for warmth and felt her veins ebbing there. He tucked the blanket around her legs and tightened the strings of her anorak hood.

They'd beaten her feet with rifle butts, flames pouring from the thatch, sparks spiralling upwards in a stink of kerosene as the circle of huts collapsed. Doves panicked from the schoolhouse roof as smoke coiled and flames *crack-cracked* like pounded grain.

She nodded. Her eyes were dark. Their pupils merged into the irises, the colour of old passion fruit. Her face still had the light skin and fine bones that had made her beautiful. She nodded again. *Enough*. Solomon helped turn the wheelchair around as she pushed at the wheels, tilting it backwards to steer. They set off along the sea front, past the old swimming pool with its rusted railings that were painted white, where it was safe to swim in seawater. Past the ruined abbey that Norse raiders had sacked. Past the beach with its café and cuticle of pale sand. There were surfers in dark wetsuits bobbing chest-deep in the breakers like seals, waiting for a wave they could ride to shore. The clouds on the northern horizon boiled, gaseous and volatile behind the white spire of another lighthouse. It had been a treacherous coast, a coast where wreckers and raiders had used the sea against the men of God, against the poor in spirit who succumbed, defenceless.

Solomon reached to check his mother's body heat again. Her hands were folded on the chequered blanket, the knuckles swollen. He should find her some gloves. As a child she'd shown him how to split jackfruit with a machete, laughing at his efforts. She'd taught him how to throw a mango against the wall of the barracks so that it softened and the flesh could be cut from the stone at its centre. How to thresh grain from wheat stalks in the little granary in their compound. She was a foreigner in the village but she didn't care, laughing at the local people when they ignored her or made remarks about her accent. The soldiers paraded in their uniforms and maroon berets and black calf-length boots and the boy, Solomon, watched them with sweet mango juice dribbling onto his shirt. At the weekends they'd used her as their whore, throwing thousand shilling notes onto the bed or paying her in beer which she could sell afterwards. He'd learned to be quiet, to become invisible. That's how she'd paid his school fees. Selling vegetables at the market, cleaning or cooking for the soldiers.

She'd thank them as he watched through the dusty curtain that divided the house. Then she washed in the bucket of water drawn from the standpipe. Then she prayed, always mentioning his father's name before she finished, pressing her hands to her face like the open leaves of a book. His father had gone to Congo to find gold, back to his own father's land.

Solomon wrapped his fingers around the wheelchair's handles, pressing his palms to their butts to push, trying not to lose his grip. The gush of shame that memory brought drenched him. Even here, where the wind was hurling off the North Sea. Even here, near those ruins of an ancient war that told him what history was and what it would be. For evermore.

He'd led them to the other boys, to where they were hiding in a crook of the river. Where the bank was licked away by its brown water and they could crouch underneath. Where they'd played hide-and-seek when they were kids. They'd seen a young crocodile there once, lying out in the sun. It fled into the water at their approach, its eyes just breaching the surface as it drifted downstream with the current. It became a legend of their own daring, how they drove it away. *A crocodile!* Back then all they had to hide from was each other.

After Solomon betrayed them, that August day, they were rounded up and marched to the village and stood in a circle with their hands on their heads like kids in school. Then the rebel commander hacked Solomon's thumbs off on the chopping block where his mother killed chickens. It was a warning. Two soldiers held his mother back with their rifles, fencing her in. He was fifteen. He didn't feel anything at first. Just the thud and shock of the blade. Then sheared bone and flesh and thick, oozing blood. He remembered a day when his mother took a white hen and struck off its head with one blow, letting its blood spurt into dust. Flies darkened the severed

head with its scarlet comb, the beak gaping, the eye shuttered by a white membrane. If you pulled the tendons that trailed from its neck, a dead hen's beak opened and closed in a silent cry.

The rebel soldiers left, driving the village children into exile. His mother bathed his hands, weeping, tearing an old *gomesi* to bind them. There was nothing to stay for. Even the soldiers at the barracks dared not return. Solomon and his mother set off for the trading centre where there was a dispensary, following the river to stay hidden, then finding the road. That's where he went to school, staying over, returning only at Christmas and Easter and for the long summer holiday. His mother hobbled with a stick for a crutch, a machete hanging from her waist. For two days they walked down the dirt road, eating cold cassava, sleeping under a coffee sack with nothing to keep the mosquitos away. They got to the school at dawn on the third day, watching it drift on the early mist like a mirage. The market stalls were deserted and the people had left. A starved white dog wandered in and out of the empty compounds. The head teacher, an Irish priest, cleaned up Solomon's wounds as his mother watched. Father Brian. His English was soft, liquid, like first rain when it patters against earth and darkens it. *Here is Solomon in all his glory.* That was his joke if he was late for Biology lessons. The other teachers had escaped, taking their pupils into the bush, making their way to the town.

They stayed with the priest for one night. He showed them the deserted schoolrooms, the empty dormitory where Solomon had slept with five other boys. There was a fish tank, green with algae, in which five dead goldfish floated belly up, stinking of slime and death. It had been Solomon's job to feed them from a special packet of food. It lay burst open on the floor and a line of ants was carrying it away, grain by grain.

In the dispensary, Father Brian soaked off the bloody bandages and dusted Solomon's wounds with antibiotic powder. They were black and swollen where his thumbs had been. He swabbed his thigh with alcohol and gave him an injection of ampicillin, patting his shoulder. *Good boy, good boy, now.* Solomon had never seen a white man cry before. He'd wanted to talk, the priest, telling them about the north of Ireland, where he'd grown up in a small village, before the seminary, before Africa. There were woods that he played in as a child, with trees that shed their leaves in winter then grew them again at another time. There was a flower called the bluebell that came in April or May, like faint mist covering everything, he said. Like morning mist, when roosters woke the village. He scratched at the grey stubble on his cheeks, leaving white track marks.

Father Brian shuttered the windows to hide the light of the paraffin lamp and then made them a meal. They sat at a table with a tablecloth and cutlery. They were served rice and beans and Solomon's mother fed him like a child with a metal fork. His hands throbbed with pain that was so constant he had to shut down his mind to close it out. He remembered those days as dull and grey and heavy with an underwater slowness, even though they were bright with sunlight.

The dog yelped in the night where Solomon lay awake on a mattress in an empty dormitory. His mother stayed at the priest's house, sleeping in the only bed. In the morning they were woken by pied crows calling. No voices or engines. The rebel soldiers had swept through days before, driving away goats, tying the legs of chickens and slinging them from their truck. If they caught you, they cut off your ears and lips. Children were forced to kill children. That way they could never leave.

His mother brought him black tea, holding the cup for him. They breakfasted on cold chapatti and leftover beans. Then Father Brian drove them south, the Toyota

with its dusty windows rocking and creaking until they reached a metaled road. Then he paid a lorry driver to take them into the next town, away from the border. Father Brian gave Solomon's mother a tight roll of money, a packet of white tablets, a bible with a maroon cover. In the town they found every language. Solomon spoke in English to find a lorry that was going south. Then two days of driving, one night sleeping sitting upright in the cab like a row of dolls. The lorry driver was a tall Tanzanian who wore jeans and a torn vest. He spoke Swahili and was carrying sugar cane to the refinery built by the Chinese at the edge of the great lake.

Solomon had blanked out the pain in his memory. What he remembered was the traffic in the city, swirling in all directions. *Matatu*, *boda boda*, bicycles, cars, buses and trucks; the myriad blue windows of a tall concrete building winking in the sun; traffic lights that changed colour as a *matatu* driver took them to the University hospital. A small man with missing eyeteeth, he'd refused the money they offered, calling his mother *Sister*, showing them the kindness of strangers. At the hospital Solomon had two operations on his hand to cut away the damaged flesh and bone. Gradually they healed, leaving uneven stumps. His hands were like those of some human prototype. Unevolved. Primitive.

He remembered the smell of the hospital, the self-important voices of the doctors, the bright white tiles in the operating theatre. He remembered the surgeon who operated on him ruffling his hair and telling him how lucky he was. His mother was given ankle splints and a walking frame to heal her broken feet. She'd thrown the bible from the truck window on the first day, her face cut from stone. She never complained about what they had done to her. Whenever he woke at night, she seemed to be watching him, her eyes dissolving in the dimmed lights.



By the time Solomon had wheeled his mother down the high street and around to their flat on the brick built estate, a fierce little wind was whipping the litter down the pavements, shaking the neon sign above the off-license that flickered at night like gunfire in a silent film. They shared a ground floor flat, part of a pebble-dashed terrace stuck with satellite dishes. Solomon helped his mother from the wheelchair in the hall, folding it under the stairs and unzipping her waterproof coat, making pliers with his first and second fingers. The heating had switched on and the flat was warm. He gave her his arm and supported her as she took tiny steps towards the living room. She lowered herself into an armchair and nodded at him.

– Thank you, son.

They spoke only English now. When he asked her to sing to him, to sing the old songs of their tribe, she refused.

– They would be bitter on my tongue.

When they had named him Solomon, they were hoping for great things. The way parents did, naming their children after kings or political leaders. The way all people hoped for better things for their children. But in the bible Solomon had been denied by God. Then his son Jeroboam took the throne, bringing slaughter, taxing his own people. Names were just foolishness. History itself was the scourge, curling around them like a whip – a scorpion’s tail – to remind them of how little had changed or could.

Now Solomon’s mother fumbled with the TV remote control to watch a gardening programme. A talkative woman with red hair and breasts half exposed was laying out a vegetable garden. Solomon watched from the doorway. He’d carried water for his mother from the river to the village, struggling to lift the weight of the cooking oil tin she’d threaded with rope to make a bucket. She’d shown him how to

pour it at the base of each plant, how to water when the heat of the day was ebbing and the sun's fury was passing. He watched her now, yearning for a piece of land where she could grow tomatoes, beans, a little spinach. Back home she'd considered growing coffee as a cash crop now that the government was encouraging it. She wasn't too old, even if her feet were useless. Now their food came from the little supermarket down the road that had a green pine tree in a green circle as its symbol. It was special place, a shrine, with its neatly packaged food lying under white light in the fridges and freezers. It was clean, without the red dust that covered everything back home. Dust that his mother swept from the house every morning. Dust that had soaked up their blood and language and history and erased them.

Solomon set about making tea in the little kitchen. He'd been surprised at how difficult it was to do things without thumbs – dressing oneself, washing with soap, wiping himself after defecation, even urinating without splashing everywhere. In England, he had reconstructive surgery, the surgeons working with the remaining muscle and bone. They told him there would be some movement, but little sensitivity. He would have to use his eyes to gauge how and where to grip. He'd been helped by a physiotherapist who taught him to do these things. For a while he'd worn prosthetic thumbs that strapped to each hand with Velcro fasteners and helped him to hold things. They were the colour of white skin, as if that didn't matter. The rebel commander had been a man of imagination.

Solomon took teabags from the caddy, holding it against his stomach with one hand and pulling off the lid with the fingers of the other, then making the tea in the pot with milk already added. He had to hold the milk bottle with both hands. He could see his mother nodding in her chair in the adjoining room. The woman on the television was flicking out a length of hosepipe and watering a row of plants. Every

now and then she looked up and forced a smile for the camera and said something he couldn't hear above the noise of the kettle. Solomon lifted the teapot and poured the tea, then placed the cups on a tin tray and carried it into the living room. His mother's eyes were hooded, as if she was almost asleep. Rain was dashing softly against the windows. He could hear music from upstairs where the Polish electrician lived. Sometimes they passed in the hallway, the electrician carrying his bag of tools and humming under his breath in a language where all the words seemed melodious, already joined together as song.

That night, Solomon lay in bed listening to his mother's breath in the next room. He thought of the sea ravaging the coastline, of Norse raiders in their longboats sculling to shore under the cliffs. As a child, the sea had been hard to imagine, though he'd been told about it, had read about it in books. When they left Africa, they'd flown over Lake Victoria, which had seemed endless, but even that hadn't prepared him. On the lake there were small fishing boats and islands covered in palm trees, but the Mediterranean was truly huge, with an endless depth. Then this grey North Sea confronting them after they flew into Manchester and travelled by train to Newcastle. In the last world war, each nation had a navy and their sailors fought in steel ships. In Africa, they killed each other out in the open, under the sun. Here, there were even ships that sailed below the surface in the cold darkness. All that energy, all that human ingenuity gone into killing each other, the sea blazing with burning oil. Now submarines carried nuclear weapons, patrolling under the ice caps, watching and waiting. A Russian submarine, The Kursk, had become trapped on the seabed and all the sailors died. But not before they had time to write to their wives and sweethearts, feeling the oxygen become exhausted, holding each other's hands in the dark, dying for the Fatherland. Such thoughts carried him into sleep. He dreamed of the village

where they'd played football, marking out goalposts on the barracks wall. He saw the river flowing like liquid metal, the crocodile lurch into its broken light.

When he woke, Solomon experienced a little spasm of surprise as he tried to close his hands around the sheets to throw them back. It was easier to think about the sea than to think about the future. The future should have run ahead of him like a road or a track clearing tangled bush. It was hard to walk that road when there seemed to be nothing there. The future, he'd realised, waking in the hospital with bandaged hands, his mother watching him from her chair beside the bed, was more than events that happened and days that dawned. The future was something you imagined in order to live. A promise you made to yourself against the curse the past had pronounced.

When the rebel soldiers came, he was with a group of younger boys in the centre of the village, playing under the jacaranda tree. Its purple flowers spilled onto the dirt. It was where the village elders held their meetings, where the government soldiers paraded to show the villagers how safe they were. It was where they had their primary school lessons – when the teacher wasn't drunk on *waragi*, or sleeping it off. *Education is light*. That's what he'd told them on his better days, smiling foolishly with perfect teeth, struggling to muster pencils and notebooks, propping up the blackboard in the decayed schoolhouse where termites ate the desks and floorboards and roof beams, where the rotted thatch let in snakes and rain.

Education? Light? That had been about the future. Solomon knew that now. Education was about acquiring wisdom. To know about the world was to know how the world had been and might be. History made the future. *Suffer the little children, to come unto me*. The rebel leader had quoted Jesus, gripping Solomon's arm, his eyes jumping like sparks, his uniform smelling of smoke, sweat and *ganja*. His fingers were hard and the vein on his forearm stood out, darkening the skin.

They'd been playing soccer with a ball made from banana fibre tied with string and Solomon was been in goal, laughing as he caught shot after shot. He'd been placing the ball to kick it out when he heard the silence and looked up to see a line of soldiers in rag-tag uniforms. They wore necklaces to feed a heavy machine gun and carried AK47s. The brass cartridge cases glittered in the sun as they closed in. The younger kids had already fled, but Solomon was trapped against the wall between the goalposts. And he couldn't leave his mother. So he'd been captured. There were reasons. The garrison at the base had gone out on patrol that morning, and those left – the fat quartermaster and cook – were shot down as they tried to escape. Two bursts on an automatic weapon, the crack of single shots, a chemical smell of spent cartridges dispersing. The rebels dragged their bodies into the village and laid them up against the jacaranda tree like a couple of drunks who'd fallen asleep against each other. The rebel commander wore a pair of women's boots with a leopard fur trim. He'd put his arm around Solomon as he led him to the chopping block, the way his father might have done.

Father Brian had given them the address and name of a contact in the city and they were taken in and cared for by a European charity. A journalist visited, scribbling in his notebook, setting off a flash camera. They'd been featured in the newspaper as an example of what the rebels did to innocent citizens. *A cause célèbre*. When it was clear that Solomon needed treatment that couldn't be given at the local hospital, they were asked if they wanted to go to Sweden or the UK. Solomon remembered Manchester United. He'd seen them play on the television set that ran from a stinking generator at the local bar. He knew nothing about Sweden, except that the people there had white hair, like albinos or ghosts.

Visas were arranged, the airfare donated from a UK charity, and they were taken to the airport. It was at the tip of a finger of land that jutted into the lake. From the porthole of the plane, between wing and fuselage, the lake passed under them like varnished copper. They were heading northwest, over deserts and mountains into Europe. It was strange how the desert seemed to have been shaped by water, with valleys and gullies wrinkling it. Solomon watched the outsized plane on the electronic map, nudging over Libya, Italy, Germany and France towards the small island of Britain. When their meals arrived in little plastic containers with foil covers, the airhostess helped him to open them. He'd grasped the fork as if it was a trowel. She was a beautiful girl in a cream suit with red lipstick and caramel skin and she was trying not to look at his hands. His mother told him how she had once been on an aeroplane to Nairobi, when she'd worked for a Muslim businessman before she'd met Solomon's father. They'd gone there to buy fabric for his clothing business. *Aigh!* she said in English, shrugging into the thin blanket the airline issued, *We will survive*. Solomon asked what happened to the businessman. His mother shrugged. He had disappeared in the civil war. What had happened to his father would have to wait. He wanted to know, but he daren't ask in case his mother knew, had really known all this time.

The cabin lights dimmed and the aeroplane droned on, hardly seeming to move, yet its airspeed was hundreds of miles an hour. His other life felt like the memory of something now, the way we remember a dream that has never happened, the way the mind can think anything, but can't unthink it.

When his mother was safely in bed, Solomon took the laptop computer into the living room and switched it on. He was taking online courses in English, Accounting and Computing and he'd been lent a machine to practice on. When they

returned home he would be able to earn his living. They'd build a house with a veranda where his mother could sit out of the sun. They'd have a little ornamental garden and a *shamba* to grow food and a fishpond, all in a compound with iron gates.

The screen lit up slowly and he typed in his password. He had a Facebook account and was gradually collecting friends. Some in the UK, some in Africa – even America and Canada. It was exciting to check his email and find a request to confirm someone as a friend. Someone he'd never meet, but who smiled out at him from their photograph. Then there were friends who knew friends and so the network grew. Sometimes he chatted to them about football, the premier league; usually he had little to say. He followed Manchester United; he lived with his mother; he was studying to be an accountant. He tried to type with all his fingers as he'd been taught, but it was hard. It was hard to do things in the correct way when *he* was no longer correct.

He had a bank account into which a monthly allowance came from the charity. He spent very little, even saved a little money, so sometimes he shopped online for small things. A tee shirt. A pair of jeans. Music for the iPod he'd been given. There was no room for a garden in the little flat, not even a window box like those he'd seen in the town, so Solomon sent away for a fish tank. It arrived in a great cardboard box packed with polystyrene. *Aigh!* His mother had said, frowning, *What have you bought now?* But Solomon had shaken his head and said nothing, smiling and placing one finger flat against his forehead, the way she'd shown him to keep secrets as a child.

Tonight, as she was sleeping, he went shopping for goldfish. Amazingly, they could be sent through the post. *Quality English-bred pond fish delivered to your door.* The tank came with a packet of gravel and water conditioner and a special bag of plastic pondweed to plant it out with. There was a little filter that you plugged into the electricity to freshen the water. You added a fish food and let it decompose to make

bacteria, then and after a week or so, you could add fish. He remembered that from Father Brian's lessons.

Solomon chose three goldfish – Comet Tails, three to four inches long – entering his credit card details carefully with the delivery address. They would arrive the day after tomorrow. Not long. He thought of the fish being chosen for him from hundreds of possibilities, one almost indistinguishable from another. The way they wouldn't know anything about it, because they had such a short memory span. Three seconds, they said, then everything was lost to them and began again. That was a myth of course, but they'd laughed about it with Father Brian when he teased someone for not paying attention. The next day was Thursday. Then Friday, when his English language assignment was due.

On Thursday afternoon he asked the woman in the supermarket about bluebells. The one who smiled at him and placed the coins so carefully into his hands. In her strange accent she told him that they grew in late April, that there was a famous bluebell wood just a few miles from town. In the spring he would take a taxi and drive his mother there to see them. They hadn't promised Father Brian anything, but they owed him that, at least. When they returned home to Uganda, they'd take some of those blue flowers in a box, their bulbs nested in damp cotton wool in a plastic bag in the darkness of the aeroplane's hold. One day, in the little house with its veranda and garden, he'd dig them into a shady place. Transplanted, they would have a new life, a new home.

On Friday morning he was downloading some free software in his bedroom when the doorbell rang. He went to the window before he went to the door. There was a white van parked crookedly on the pavement. On the doorstep a small man with tattooed arms checking a hand-held electronic terminal. He pronounced Solomon's



name awkwardly, apologetically. Scottish. *Cattle raiders*. Another of Father Brian's jokes. The man fetched a small cardboard box from the van and jammed it under one arm, scanning a barcode on the label, holding the terminal steady for Solomon as he scratched his name on the screen, making a fist to grip the pen. The driver handed over the box, it had a shifting weight in it, slipping weirdly from side to side.

His mother called from the living room as he took the box into the kitchen, but he ignored her. It was to be a surprise, after all. His father told him how they had netted river fish in the Congo as a boy. He remembered that. A line of boys waded out barefoot, drawing the net tight between them and feeling the fish strike it, becoming lodged by their gills. His father ended the story like that, on a dramatic flourish: *What should have helped them breathe killed them!* Afterward they pulled the leeches from their legs and skewered the fish over a campfire, taking the rest home to share out in the village. He left when Solomon was eight years old. And, yes, he was called David. David Patrice Kubamba. The night before the box was delivered Solomon heard his mother talking in her sleep in a language he didn't understand. Perhaps she was talking to his father in his own tongue. She never spoke of him now.

Solomon took the box to the kitchen sink and found a knife. He had to grip the knife with both hands, carefully cutting through the tape that fastened the box. Inside was a plastic bag full of water and when the light entered the three goldfish in the bag exploded, making it jump and thrum. Solomon closed the lid quickly, pulling the delivery note from inside the box that told him to open it only in dim light to avoid shocking the fish. His heart had jumped and it was pounding now. There was a word for such situations, when you tried to do something good and something bad resulted. The fish had travelled in a complete absence of light, feeling the box lift and sway, then drop and lift again. Then the van's engine throbbing through water. All the time,

seeing nothing. That was how the Russian sailors must have felt as power on The Kursk failed and they faced death, writing letters to their mothers and wives under dimming torches. Dying one by one with their memories in the face of the only certainty. The goldfish had travelled towards him in their own element, their gills kneading oxygen from water, touching against each other in liquid darkness. Solomon let the box stand with the lid half closed. Then, when they were used to the light, he took the knife and the box and carried them to the front room where his mother dozed and the fish tank stood on a low table.

Solomon cut the bag and poured the fish awkwardly into the tank where they darted and swirled, golden ricochets flashing with fire and life. His eyes could hardly follow them or know which was which. Then they were still, breathing calmly, their fins and tails swaying, nosing at the gravel or the strands of artificial weed. Solomon hoped they had already forgotten everything that had happened to them: their own surprise and terror, that sudden blast of light. They would be satisfied with the passing moment. What *had* been meant nothing to them. They were what *was*, pure and simple. They feared nothing except what the present turned into. Their eyes were wide, watchful and indifferent. They swam to unknown territories, nudging gravel or air bubbles that rose to the water's surface, moving on to what was endlessly new. Solomon pressed his hands against the glass of the tank, feeling it cold and smooth. The fish watched him with open mouths, their gills working. They flickered away, a shower of golden meteorites. Then he called to his mother to wake her.



## **‘Solomon: Terror and *Terroir*’**

Art is essentially serious and beneficial, a game placed against chaos and death, against entropy. It is a tragic game, for those who have the wit to take it seriously, because our side must lose; a comic game – or so a troll might say – because only a clown with sawdust brains would take our side and eagerly join in. (Gardner 1978: 6)

In this essay I want to consider some of the elements of what John Gardner defines as the ‘tragic game’ and how I tried to take them seriously through the narrative elements in a new work of short fiction published here. I do not want to analyse their synthesis so much as to try to trace some of the narrative strands back to their origins in a way that illuminates the technique of the story, how it seeks to gain its ‘moral’ affect, and how, in particular, the story tries to explore themes of violence and dislocation through the experience of its central character. What impulses led to the exploration and integration of these elements, and what were the moral, artistic and ethical issues for me in appropriating this material to my own narrative purpose?

*Solomon* belongs to a new collection of short fiction, *Terroir* (Mort 2015). The opening story – *Terroir* – sets out one of the main pre-occupations of the collection: the exploration of place, occupation, longing and belonging, through often-violent narrative scenarios. There is no exact translation for the French word *terroir*, which originated in viticulture, but it can relate to any organic product that might be said to reflect both nature and nurture: wine, coffee, the human mind. As one of my characters remarks in *Terroir* – ‘It wasn’t just land and weather and minerals, but

everything that had happened on the land and to it.’ So to what extent do the stories in the collection – and ‘Solomon’ in particular – explore this relationship between place and the constituted ‘moral character’ of narrative? To what extent can the concept of *terroir* be extended to psychology in fiction? How do those ideas coexist with representations of extreme violence that seems to be a constituent of contemporary culture, from novels and films to online war games?

I have been working in Africa on a fairly regular basis since 2001, principally in Uganda. Solomon is partly set in northern Uganda where a corrosive and spasmodic civil war has been going on for a number of decades. Led by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), notorious for inculcating a culture of violence, the rebel forces have no very well-defined political agenda, or even specific military objectives but move between neighbouring states – Uganda, DR Congo and Sudan – where they kill, kidnap and terrorize. Many villagers have been gratuitously mutilated through the severing of lips, ears, noses, hands or fingers. The LRA are perhaps most notorious for the kidnapping of children (see de Temmerman 2001) and for forcing them to kill each other so that their escape is rendered futile. Boys are forced to become child soldiers whilst girls become brides of war and are often deliberately impregnated in an exploitative spiral that leads to an erosion of personal and cultural identity and a devastating loss of self-worth.

But the genesis of the story can be traced – as the narrative itself begins – to the north-east coast of England when I was staying in Tynemouth a few years ago. I travel with a camera and notebook and use them to respond to experience without necessarily thinking too far forwards into specific literary form. Typically, a trip would result in a series of visual images and a set of written notes that might range from the recording of actual impressions to forms of ‘free writing’ that have an

improvisatory impulse. I write poetry and prose fiction, but the way in which the ‘raw material’ takes shape is often unpredictable. Occasionally, the same core experience may be explored in prose and poetry at different times, but usually the first moments of impulsive composition carry with them the implication of form. Essentially, something dictates whether the ongoing line is broken or continues to the edge of the page and beyond. I suspect that the essence of this implicit decision is performative of an explicit or implied POV: whether I am beginning to write in the persona of a character who brings a degree of psychological colouration, or whether I am exploring that more fundamentally self-rooted sense of poetic persona – the lyrical self-conscious ‘I’ that fronts a poem’s flux of material representations and self-propelled linguistic energy.

Many of the details that initiate and move the story forward were direct observations from my stay at Tynemouth – the kestrel with the missing tail feather, the sleeping eider duck, the women launching their boat and the surfers coming ashore at the edge of the North Sea under the ruins of the abbey. When I began to write I had no notions that Solomon and his mother existed in any fictional sense, or that they would be pulled from Uganda into this ‘other’ narrative. The wheelchair and the sensations of it pushing against the palms of Solomon’s hands may seem a peculiar stimulus, but I was a nursing assistant for over two years and somehow that familiar manipulation of an unwieldy contraption with its human cargo became the impulse for the invention of Solomon and his mother. This narrative moment may have been triggered by seeing a wheelchair user in that location: not all observations are written down but linger as sub-conscious impressions, a kind of narrative substrate. The choice of title came from a radio programme about the biblical King Solomon that I listened to as I was driving to work one morning. The rubric for the

story – Rehoboam’s vicious imprecation – was quoted and made a powerful impression with its metaphorical pronouncement of violence escalated from one generation to the next. The decision to entitle the story and name its central character was simultaneous. Solomon, like many Africans, has a biblical name, and is wise beyond his years, but ironically lacks the power or authority of a king. In fact, he is weakened and compromised from the moment he enters the story and betrays the whereabouts of his friends to the rebel forces.

Once the fundamental elements of a story are in place: a primary setting, a timeline or ‘timeflux’, characters that bring a narrative tension with them – interlopers, strangers, migrants – the story almost writes itself. This is to say that the combustible material that fuels its ongoing narrative has enough critical mass to make a chain reaction in the writer’s consciousness. Even better, that reaction is further stimulated by the potential of the emergent work to develop ‘moral traction’. I mean that in no sermonizing sense, but in the sense that the values the story has begun to explore carry a high stake in terms of their interaction with the reader’s engagement: a sense that the story, the characters, the narrative outcome all come to matter to them in a way that might ‘move’ them. Raymond Carver describes this affect in the introduction to ‘Where I’m calling from’:

If we’re lucky, the writer and reader alike, we’ll finish the last line or two of a short story and then just sit for a minute, quietly. Ideally, we’ll ponder what we’ve just written or read; maybe our hearts or our intellects will have been moved off the peg just a little from where they were before. Our body temperature will have gone up, or down, by a degree. Then breathing evenly and steadily once more, we’ll collect ourselves, writers and readers alike, get up, ‘created of warm blood and nerves’, as

a Chekhov character puts it, and go on to the next thing: life. Always life. (Carver 1988: xiv)

Carver's description of this affect is significant in its simultaneous identification of writer and reader, melding not only their reader/writer personae but also linking the acts of reading and writing as a seamless dynamic that leads towards an implied moral value: that of a life lived to its full potential, a life engaged with the experiential textures of the world and the imaginative textures of the human mind.

When a writer friend read my first collection *Touch* she told me how much she liked the work but added: '[...] but the misery, the misery!' I thought about that a lot afterwards, wondering to what extent my own mindset as a writer had veered towards the darker side of human experience. I was also struck by the remark in the context of this writer's own work, which explores themes of exploitation, racial oppression and violence. Could it be that writers become blind to their own thematic preoccupations, that we are drawn into the exploration of extreme scenarios that become regulated – even personally normative – so that we are unable to fully register them as choices? There followed an anxiety about gratuitousness, something that I have always tried to work against in my writing because the casualization of violence in literature, film and gaming strikes me as a failing of moral perspective, a commodification of violence that, in the world of actual relations, is literally wounding, devastating and de-humanizing. So as this essay unfolds, it seems necessary to address this central issue and to try to understand my own way of working with representations of pain and suffering: 'the game placed against chaos and death, against entropy'.

The central dilemma for any artist in representing suffering is in resisting a tendency to aestheticize it. A work of art is almost inevitably composed upon



aesthetic principles – the golden section, narrative unity, harmony, counterpoint – and even horrific material can be subsumed to those ends. That can be an unwitting process on the part of the artist whose instincts are trained to make a satisfying whole from even the most fragmented experience, or to create the possibility of a whole that the reader constructs from the fragments they juxtapose as textual encounter. Even more destabilizing of moral perspective, is the glamour of violence in a work of art, the way in which it creates a hip atmospheric or glib familiarity through tokenistic gestures. Such representations tacitly acknowledge our own deep unease with violence as a reality separate from ourselves. Rather than being the locus of actual suffering it becomes a playful arena mediated through the euphemisms of ‘zapping’, ‘wasting’ or ‘stiffing’ a phantasmagorically constructed ‘other’. We know that, yet watch Jihadi columns on the BBC news being ‘taken out’ in Iraq with the same remote sense of registration as that of its virtual digital cousin, the war game. This observation is something of a postmodern cliché, but there is a sense in which no representation of violence can ever prepare us for the invasion of our own bodies by bullet, blade, rapist or fist. The visceral realities of pain, fear and degradation diminish and condition the human self – at least temporarily, since the more positive outcome of that conditioning may be empathy and compassion for others who have also suffered.

In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag addresses the issue of compassion fatigue, the normalization of violence through its ubiquitous imagery and narratives:

Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half’s

worth of those professional specialized tourists known as journalists. Wars are now also living room sights and sound. Information about what is happening elsewhere, called ‘news’, features conflict and violence – ‘If it bleeds it leads’ runs the venerable guideline of tabloids and twenty-four hour headline news shows – to which the response is compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view. How to respond to the steadily increasing flow of information about the agonies of war was already an issue in the late nineteenth century. (Sontag 2003: 16)

For a creative writer, choices of focus for their work are perhaps freer than those of a journalist sent to a zone of conflict with clear professional objectives. Stories have an invasive quality in the consciousness of the writer; they evoke *qualia*, not facts. They demand to be written when they reach that critical point described earlier. My response to these ethical dilemmas is played out through the narrative technique of the story, which creates both intimacy and objectivity through the free-indirect style and sets up two levels of violence in an attempt to create a sense of scale that might address de-sensitization – though pain, of course, is notoriously subjective, as is the response of any reader to its depiction. Violence finds its apotheosis in cruelty where we must confront not just the physical act of violation but the way in which it is accompanied by a kind of imaginative appreciation of its affect. As Anthony Storr observes:

Men [*sic*], however, possess the capacity of identification as well as that of projection. They are able to enter into the pain of another, and to imagine what the sufferer feels. Upon this basis of identification with the insulted and injured rests man’s charity and altruism: for no one would have been concerned to free slaves or

to prevent child-labour unless, imaginatively, he could put himself into the shoes of a slave or an ill-treated child. But upon this basis also rests man's capacity for cruelty. (Storr 1968: 98)

This realization begins not with the depredations of the rebel soldiers in the story ('The rebel commander was a man of imagination') but with the village children taunting the hammerkop bird by placing a red cloth on its nest. The bird then exhausts itself in trying to put out the fire and save its offspring. Cruelty begins in childhood's plastic moral consciousness as a form of immature gratification, a frisson of recognition, a guilty pleasure at pain inflicted, perhaps a rite of passage. For those adults who themselves have experienced violence, powerlessness, rejection or failure, or who have an innately psychopathic disregard for humanity, it can become a form of indiscriminate revenge and power play fuelled by inverted empathy.

At the extreme level of violence in the story, two men are killed by the rebels as they run away and propped up against a tree as a warning. There is a slightly unreal quality to this experience for Solomon – the men appear to be drunk or asleep – so that the violence has a kind of familiar surreality. What I mean by that paradox is the sense that events have an aura of unreality because they simultaneously resemble the everyday and the uncanny; they are at the same time ordinary and life changing. What brings the sense of physical disruption close to the reader is the severing of Solomon's thumbs by the rebel commander. This is related to the routine decapitation of a hen by Solomon's mother, but it is also symbolic of the de-humanizing nature of violence. The possession of an especially flexible opposable thumb distinguishes humans even from other primates and enables many aspects of human culture, from playing music to writing, to the full tenderness of human touch. To be without this mechanical

grasping ability is to be fundamentally diminished, to be in need of extensions in the form of prosthetic digits. Isolation also puts Solomon in need of contact, which is answered through the virtual ‘digital’ space of the Internet. As Solomon learns to manipulate objects with his prosthetic thumbs, he also learns to manipulate websites and social media – a kind of cultural prosthesis.

The cultural provenance of the story is complicated and ‘Solomon’ can be understood as a transcultural story in three main ways: firstly, because its author chooses to explore a culture and locus different to the one they normally habituate, so that an effort of understanding is extended into the cultural realm; secondly, the characters themselves – the Irish priest, Father Brian, Solomon and his mother – are culturally transposed. Thirdly, although English is used extensively in Uganda, there is also a linguistic transposition, as Acholi and Swahili are implied linguistic textures beyond the free-indirect English narration. The story is also ethnically or racially transposed in the sense that here is a white author writing from the viewpoint of a black protagonist – an invasion or appropriation of *terroir* as narrative method. This incongruity is echoed in the provision of ‘white’ prosthetic thumbs to Solomon when in the United Kingdom. Can a ‘white’ author authentically convey the experience of a ‘black’ protagonist without disjunction? Are those terms even meaningful? Setting aside my own effort here, I think the answer has to be that they are constraints from which writers need to break free, unless we believe – and this is the core of racism – that black, white and coloured people are fundamentally different in the way they are configured as human beings *because* of their skin colour. As Ratey (2001) points out, what configures human consciousness is human experience. By representing that experience through a character, there is a melding in the consciousness of Solomon, a free flow between the qualia of cultural and geographical location – European and

African – whilst his engagement with computer science and the Internet invokes a virtual location beyond borders.

So, whilst there is some emphasis in skin colour in the story, some inference of linguistic and cultural difference, we enter Solomon's consciousness in the free indirect style in a way that confirms him as a human being with the same functionalities of memory and consciousness as any reader. This, in a sense is the fundamental point of the story: that the play of consciousness in any individual is unique in its reference points – a personal history that can be characterized and represented through memories. In Solomon's case these are a preoccupation with his own violation, Father Brian, his mother, bluebells, The Kursk (literally a 'killing machine') and the dead goldfish that become objects of a living desire. Those associations are formed into a recognizable sense of rhythm and movement. In other words, the contents and flashpoints of Solomon's consciousness may seem a part of his phenomenal personal humanity, whilst the way in which that consciousness behaves has a universally recognizable quality.

The great project of fiction – taking us back to moral traction – seems to me to address the question, 'What is it like to be someone else?' This is also a fascination for neuroscience:

Qualia are the phenomenological properties of experience; the "what it is like" of consciousness that are elements that can only be known from one subjective standpoint. For example, you cannot experience another person's pain. You can infer what the other person is going through, but there is no direct transfer of the experience. (Ratey 2001: 145).

When we share so much of our biology (over 85 per cent of protein-coding DNA) with mice and other animal species, according to the National Genome Research Institute (2010), how different can human beings really be from each other? Behind that question lies the artistic project that seeks to push back against entropy, to say that human beings matter as individuals because they *are* individuals, like ourselves in every fundamental, yet uniquely configured. Others are ‘other’ not because of culture or ethnicity (though they may be factors) but because of a uniquely configured and conditioned consciousness. We are the sum of our experience and inherited characteristics, elements that form the dynamic *terroir* of selfhood.

The use of goldfish in the story is linked to this exploration of consciousness since they are famously represented as having a three-second memory (though Solomon knows that this is an exaggeration). Unlike the trapped sailors on *The Kursk*, they remain in their element, rather than out of it (like the fish Solomon’s father catches by their gills). Solomon sends for the fish by mail order and they arrive in a darkened box of water, a world within a world, that he fails adequately to imagine, mistakenly opening the box in daylight. The panic of the fish is both shocking and momentary. Placed in the fish tank, they apparently forget their trauma. As far as Solomon can see, they lack the essential consciousness and self-consciousness that complicates our experience of the world temporally, spatially and spiritually. They dwell in the elusive or non-existent present moment, unlike humans who are caught always between action, memory and anticipation. Wolfgang Iser relates this state of being to the reading experience:

In whatever way, and under whatever circumstances, the reader may link the different phases of the text together, it will always be the process of anticipation

and retrospection that leads to the formation of the virtual dimension, which in turn transforms the text into an experience for the reader. The way in which this experience comes about through a process of continual modification is closely akin to the way in which we gather experience in life. And thus the ‘reality’ of the reading experience can illuminate basic patterns of real experience. (Iser 1988: 194)

My story is also intended to move in this way, with its temporal flux and dislocated narratives. When the submariners in the doomed Kursk of Solomon’s imagination write home to their sweethearts knowing that they are about to die, they exemplify this tragic awareness in a way that the trapped goldfish apparently cannot. These contradictions, dwelled upon by Solomon, are intended to show his growing moral responsiveness, which is inevitably conditioned by his own experience. He is sensitized by suffering rather than morally deformed by it.

My story has at its heart an act of violence that is non-ideological, and in this sense it relates to the casual cruelties of childhood. But the effects of violence are shown to be catastrophic. We are conditioned to high levels of violence through cinematic and literary representation, but the story tries to restore the sense that violence changes us both physically and psychologically. There has been a longstanding project to dissociate violence from war in order that war can be more easily justified in the theoretical realms of deterrence, containment, dissuasion. Civilian casualties have risen in every conflict since the early nineteenth century and, as Knightley (2000) argues, throughout the history of war journalism, a culture of censorship has prevailed. I wanted to use conflict as a backdrop to my work (the civil war in Uganda, the history of Viking raids on the north-east coast), but to scale down the effects of violence into the lives of human beings who are both vulnerable and

resilient. The timescale of the story also plays its part here. We have, at most, a few days of Solomon's life in the forward moving present of the story, yet the effects of violence creates another temporal scale, one that resonates throughout human history, asking questions about our complex deeper natures, about perceived inevitability, and about modes of survival.

I meant the story to be redemptive in its closing moments as Solomon and his mother see the sensual flash of the comet-tails moving in their true element. Solomon is already planning to return home with the bluebells that thread the story as a vision of home: home in the widest sense of a nostalgic locus and a future dwelling place, the sense that when we return home we simultaneously return to past and future, to a narrative that we strive to grasp and express through values that might be unashamed, liberating and tenable. None of this is written in the belief that literature can be instructive of specific moral values that may be instilled into the reader. My sense of a story is more that of a compressed gas rather than a crystalline form; a pressurized narrative sphere in which crystals are constantly forming and dissolving upon reading and re-reading. Stories can help us to understand the 'way we are' (and that's close to some popular definition of culture). They can help us to live in acknowledgement of the way we might become. They can help us to live better in the sense that we have a richer understanding of the deeper, power-seeking, nihilistic, self-hating impulses that drive violent human interactions; an understanding that, through fictional encounter, is both apprehended intellectually and *felt* viscerally. Perhaps they can help us to avoid the seemingly inevitable visitations of the past upon the present that Solomon's son, Rehoboam pronounces in the rubric to my story. And perhaps there is some redemptive dignity in the irrepressible optimism of that tragi-comical clown with sawdust brains.



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