

# Those who are about to die salute you.

I wake and it's dark. Outside, stars flicker waxily in the tropical night.

The air is full of city scents: paraffin, cheap fry-ups, garbage, jasmine, fear.

I would like to lie down but I can't because there's no room. There are seventy other women in the cell with me. The things the prison guards did to me I don't ever want to talk about.

Why am I here, I ask myself? I'm hardly more than a child. Can it really be because I was in a play the government didn't like?

My body hurts. I look out of the window and yearn to be free.

Who am I?

\*

We're herding goats near the old dry well.

There's grass here, if you look hard: a faint green, like the first fuzz of beard that both of us so eagerly await.

The soldiers are in a dirty truck. They get out and ask for our papers. Well, ten year old boys don't have papers and we can't read anyway. They can tell by our accents that we're not the same community as them.

Suddenly, I know what will happen. A shout. A shriek of terror. A flash of the knife.

Hassan, his throat slit like a halal goat, the warm blood of his body curdling in the dirt like beads.

I will never forget these things.

Who am I?

\*

I'm at a rubbish tip outside the city. Around me are other people searching through the garbage.

It's where you come to try to find the remains of people that the security squads have finished with. Me, I'm looking for my brother.

Some navy men came to our house and took him away in a car. After he vanished, my mother began to lose her mind.

I was sick earlier. I found this spine sticking up into the air like a tree. The ribs had been snapped off short and the skull was gone. It was still wearing its blue jeans. I couldn't tell if it was my brother.

The navy said he'd be coming home. But we never saw him again.

Now I know we never will, for I've just found his collar. The marines have torn it off his shirt and used it as a blindfold on someone else.

What will I tell my mother?  
Who am I?

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I am running, with the giant strength of panic, a small child tucked under each arm.

Behind us, our village fills with mushrooming white clouds of gas. Even from here we can smell the rotten onions. Any nearer and we'd be dead.

I turn and see my wife running a few paces behind me. She also is carrying two children. Her face is twisted in an anguish I dare not confront.

You see, we have five children, not four.

But when the gas shells started bursting, we could only pick up two each.

I will never forget that small weeping figure, running along behind us with outstretched arms, begging us not to leave him.

As God is my witness, I never loved him more than at that moment.

He was my son.  
Who am I?

ment and it is my government that is persecuting me.

Where will I get a visa? Visas are issued by British consulates. Even if I could get to one from the mountains where I have fled with my children, they would not give me a visa.

\*

If I can escape with a little money, maybe I can buy a plane ticket.

But if I arrive in Britain without a valid passport or visa, the airline that brought me will now be fined £2,000.

In the past, when the fine was £1,000, a British airline once illegally detained asylum seekers and prevented

No other time limit in immigration law is as short as this one. Even concerned organisations like Amnesty will have no time to get involved.

Since I cannot bring myself to speak of the tortures I endured, and because there's no-one to help me, my story simply won't be told.

I'll be sent back. It means a return to living in fear. To risking imprisonment, torture, maybe even death.

\*

Maybe you'll say that neither my life nor my death are your business.

But they are.

Britain signed the 1951 Geneva



Wood cut by Hong, Song-Dam.

Who am I? I am every refugee that needs a safe haven.

I am the mother and the father, I am the old woman and the child, I am the young man, and the young woman with a new baby.

I am every human being who is persecuted for my race, my religion or my political beliefs. Every person who is tortured or jailed without justice.

I am not one person but many. Thousands of my names are preserved in the vaults of Amnesty International.

There, in sad drab folders, are the stories of my lives, folded in the darkness of cardboard and steel. Open them and my faces stare up at you out of the files.

The worst thing about the stories written here is that they're not even exaggerated.

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Today in the House of Commons, there will be a debate on the question of asylum seekers.

The Government wants to stop 'bogus' refugees applying for asylum in this country.

They have made it illegal to enter Britain without proper documents - a passport and a visa.

But how am I to get a passport? Passports are issued by my govern-

ment even from speaking to British immigration officials.

It did this to save £1,000 per head. What will happen now.

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Up till now, if I landed in Britain, I would have been entitled to free legal advice from a lawyer of my choice to help me prepare my asylum application.

The Government is planning to take this right away.

I will not be allowed to choose my own lawyer, even if that lawyer wants to help me.

How will I tell my story?

Who will make sure that the British officials have thoroughly understood my situation?

\*

If, in spite of all the obstacles, I arrive in Britain and my request for asylum is refused, then I have the right - not of Appeal - but to ask leave to Appeal.

However, if this new Bill becomes law, I will have just two days in which to exercise this right.

This, despite the fact that I am held in custody; that my English is not very good; that I have no money so I cannot engage a legal adviser of my choice; and that I must use the prescribed official form, whether I can understand what it says or not.

Convention on Refugees.

It says that you must permit any person to apply for asylum who has reason to fear for their safety in their own country on grounds of race, religion or politics.

\*

Perhaps it's futile appealing to reason. So let me speak to you another way.

Think of the love that binds you to your family. How you would die for your children.

I too feel such a love for my family. But I know it isn't strong enough to deflect bullets and whips and knives.

If our positions were reversed and I were watching as your family was torn apart - mother from child, child from parent - if I could feel your pain, your horror, your grief - maybe I too would

just shrug and do nothing. Maybe that's human nature.

But perhaps we can do better.

Perhaps we can make our fine-sounding principles - justice, humanity, mercy, kindness - have some real meaning.

So whoever you are, reading this, here is what you can do.

\*

If you are an MP, about to enter the House to take part in the debate, you can vote against the Bill.

If you're an ordinary citizen, you can telephone your MP at the House of Commons and say you'd like him or her to vote against the Bill. The number is 071-219 3000. Best do it right away. They'll be going into the Chamber soon.

'Those who are about to die salute you.' It's how people who were about to be thrown to the lions in the Roman arena greeted those who had the power to grant them life or death.

What's it to be for me? Thumbs up? Or thumbs down?

\*

You'll notice that there is also a coupon on this page.

It offers you the chance to join Amnesty International, an organisation that has been working with refugees and victims of human rights abuse for thirty years.

Every year Amnesty's work helps save countless lives, and make things a little more tolerable for thousands of prisoners of conscience in jails across the globe.

Please join.

I say again, please join - although no-one will be surprised if you don't.

Amnesty, frankly, is not expecting a huge response to this coupon. For it has found in the past that when it talks about refugees, a lot of people switch off.

But this time you're not talking to a faceless 'refugee'. You're talking to me.

To me, the grieving father. Me, the lost child. Me, the woman with the slit open belly. Me, the boy whose eyes were burned from his head.

I call upon you to rise up in revolt. Not against your leaders but against your prejudices.

I wish to be a member of Amnesty International. I enclose £15 Individual  £20 Family  £6 OAP  £6 Student, Under 18, Claimant  I wish to donate £250  £100  £50  £25  £10  Other  I enter my Access, Visa, Mastercard No.  Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Card expiry date \_\_\_\_\_ If paying by credit card you should give the address where you receive your credit card bill.

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To: Amnesty International British Section, FREEPOST, London EC1B 1HE.

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