A Bird Set Free

It invades mostly at night. When it does, I cannot sleep. It has no body of its own, but I sense it prowling in the dark corners of my room. It coalesces with the shadows, waiting for me to succumb to its presence. I hear its gruff voice, like grating sound of distorted whispers burgeoning inside my head and also outside, carried far into the compound. Its loudness swirls round the mango trees in the orchard, slithers its way between the drooping branches, only to gather momentum strong enough to penetrate the walls of my room, then into my skin, and into my skull. Oftentimes, I palm my ears and try to bar it out, pleading for it to stop. But tonight, I surrender to its grip.

When the mauling begins, my heart pulsates and my head throbs nonstop. I'm unable to fight it because I'm too exhausted to resist this thing that likes to play. It plays in my body and with my body. In times like this, life becomes torture. In times like this, I'm happy for the dead, that they escaped this torture. I wish I'm one of them. Life is torture, and torture is life testing our resolve and elasticity. I'm resilient and elastic, I force-feed myself this assurance. Or am I not? *I'm not. I'm so fragile that glasses cringe at my brittleness*. I bawl and scream into this void that is my half-empty room. I want to sleep this agony off, but sleep refuses to save tonight.

It's past one a.m. I have spent the entire night crying and slurping my tears. With the little strength left in me, I teeter to a corner and slouch against the wall, knees propped up, my head buried in between them, and I cry more. My breathing is raspy. My plight darkens. I need salvation—from this thing, from this torture, from myself. I trawl for things that can moor me

into stillness, something soothing, something with a touch of healing. I pray and pray, but my mind is a labyrinth. I feel so altered. I want to remain here till everything ends, till the world ends. But how stupid of me to think that this loop of a world will ever end. My eyes are bloated. I blink and blink. And they rest on my phone lying on the bed where I had earlier flung it in rage. I reach for it. The battery is low. I want to call someone. A friend, perhaps. One who can offer me some succour. I scroll through my contact list, searching and searching and then it hits me: I have no one. Except strictly-on-business contacts. Many times, I have attempted to make friends and failed at it because I really did not know how to make or keep them, how to stay in touch. I'm one whose head is constantly buried in the unbearable heaviness of my tragedies and I live through each day with a hole in the universe carved precisely in my own shape, watching the world spin wildly while I remained entirely out of sync with it. I think of my mother now. I ring her twice. She doesn't answer. I wish I can fly to her, fall to my knees and let her see how altered I am, how slowly I'm unravelling—a fabric fraying at the seams. But she lives thousand kilometers away from me. If I survive tonight, I can reach home the next day. But I doubt I will survive the night. Next, I navigate to Google Chrome, desperate for a means of escape.

what's this phantom that steals the stars from my eyes and drapes my spirit in a shroud of endless dusk?

Google:

—severe depression test, find your answers in 5 minutes.

—suicide helplines in Nigeria.

—Call a friend or family.

there's a sunless sky within me, my breathe a troubled tide, and the thoughts of finality are the only shore in sight; tell me, will this storm eventually break, or does the night only darkens?

[Phone Battery about to shut down]

To every predicament that shadows the soul, there coils a root cause. Some kind of seed, in silence sown, that blooms into the thorns we know. But for me, I cannot tell what the root cause was or how it all began. But this is what I remember: it all started with an overwhelming feeling of hollowness. Of a chronic exhaustion. Of unwantedness. Of inadequacy—a crushing sense that I'm never enough, like I'm fundamentally broken, a failure that never should have been here to begin with. Then, there's the indescribable numbness. This thing is an infection—bacterial, viral, feral. It moves into my body, and it takes up residence there. It wraps around my insides like a boa constrictor waiting to feed, to strangle me into submission.

But the bathroom calls out to me, ready to offer its little help. It always does, even though the help it offers is temporary. There, I grip the sink. It's stained with yellow bits, and cracked. The fragrance of air freshener hovers in the air. The mirror is too foggy to hold my appearance, as if hinting at my defenselessness. A weakness sweeps my feet, and I slouch on the white tiles. The gloom in my eyes bulges and bulges till it deflects. I let it pour and snake down my cheeks and gather at my feet. It drowns me. I'm a thing doddering at the edge of hopelessness.

I crawl to the shower. It runs. I stare at the water dripping from the showerhead. I enter the water. It coats me. It feels like a relief. I inhale and exhale slowly. The water tinkles me. A giggle leaks out of my slightly parted lips, and I limn the feeling happiness. Happiness has a way of setting a soul free, like a bird freed from its astringent cage. This is what makes happiness so fascinating—the way it launches a man on solid rocks above the sea of his troubles. However, happiness, itself, is ephemeral. So, I bask in it while it lasts. But the alien thing senses it—this iota of glee, this speck of healing—and returns. It slithers into my head, as if to say happiness is prohibited in my body. This thing in my head wants to slaughter me. I'm sure it can. I don't want it to, at least not now, and I don't know how to cope with it, and if I can cope, for how long will this menace continue? I don't know what to think anymore. I'm tired. I'm weeping again. The thing, so insidious, takes onto itself a different voice and occupies my thoughts as I trudge into my room, my body wet. This time, the voice is calm, imploring with the tenderness of a mother's voice singing her toddler a lullaby. The warmth in the voice makes me want to do what it says. It sounds and feels like my own voice, the part of me seeking to escape my body. It asks me if I know what it means to die, and I say no. It asks if I would like to know. Life has lost its savour and the world around me its shine, and so I stop dead in my tracks like a lost child in the

middle of nowhere. From my landlord's apartment next-door croons Sia's *Bird Set Free*. The volume is loud enough to wake the dead. The lyrics cascade over me like a lifeline.

The thing in my head drawls:

— Why don't you want to end this suffering?

I hear Sia say something about a scream inside that eats us alive. This is it. It wants me gone. Do I want myself gone? *I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die,* she's singing.

Laughter inside my head:

— You poor thing, unplanned endings can be strangely beautiful.
Don't you know?

In rage, I overturn my room, knocking down everything in my path. My room feels like a penitentiary; still, I can't go out into the night even though I've a nagging feeling of running away. My eyes are foggy. They hurt. My head hurts. My body hurts.

— See how helpless you are. End it all in a grand style. End it, boy.

The laughter echoes louder inside my head.

I strut to the kitchen to escape it, instead I find myself reaching for a knife. This tyrant in my head urges me to succumb to its preeminence. It urges me to let the sharp blade flirt with my wrist, to open a rift in it, to let the gash unleash a crimson flow. But Sia sings about a bird set free, about flying, about hitting the high notes, about having a voice roaring into the night, about fighting back loud. And I see a tiny light shine through the fogginess clouding my eyes. With it comes an assuring voice that tomorrow can be brighter than today, that the weight I carry will not always feel this crushing. The light reminds me of the beautiful things life can still hold—the simple peace of breathing without the storm pressing so hard, how I can still matter to the ones

fated to depend on me, that my presence can be a steady hand to someone who will need it soon. Through the fog, the light assures me there's more ahead, and I'm still needed here. And so, I roar alongside Sia who shrieks: *I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die.*

I let the knife go as my knees rushes to graze the ground. I feel the veins in my head pulse, feel the phlegm flooding down my face. Then comfort surges through my entire body, steering me towards quietude. I feel the thing retreating. I fold onto the cold floor. An abrupt release surges through my entire body, a calm unfurling, and I cry and cry and cry. My head is free. Empty of noise. Empty of that vicious laughter.

Sia is still singing about a bird set free.