

STAYING SAFE

By

Yaa de Villiers Amamoo

“It is an easy thing to talk of patience to the afflicted,
To speak the laws of prudence to the houseless wanderer”

William Blake, Vala, or The Four Zoas

Safe - that word is starting to go berserk in my head. When I was a kid, I'd say a word over and over and over again till it came adrift from its meaning and I would have to swim back to it through stories and signs and the thesaurus. When you strain the daily news through the word, it is never the same when you return to it.

In my street there is an abandoned block of flats, and it seems to have become a haven for a group of nyaope addicts. Nyaope is a kind of heroin. Nyaope is local, heroin is global, so even though it's the same disease, the word makes it feel less threatening, more familiar. Like family is supposed to make you feel safe and welcome and fearless and free. There is a species of moth, an unbeautiful, incompetent flier, that bumbles into our rooms and bothers our slumber. Our one kid calls them nyaope moths.

Unlike Portugal, our government has not proactively engaged with the problem of addiction. It remains a festering sore, inflamed at this crisis time of active virus. Ignoring a problem doesn't make it go away. Phephisa America. Condolences, UK. Official bulletins are contradictory like sixteen-year olds muttering 'We low-key (don't) want you to live I mean die'. We are all exposed, emperors and poor alike. Naked as winter coughs all over us, but the bastards elbow us out the soup kitchen queue. Where is the love - remember that song that summer that other time, as protection – not only the words, also the tune. They say joy replenishes immunity.

When South Africa's lockdown measures were announced, a petrol attendant said to me, why did they ban our booze just because Italians and Americans are dying like chickens? Because, my brother, when America sneezes we all reach for our hankies, and check our policies. Because we are them and they are us - a lot of the people dying that side are Black and Hispanic. He said Aaah.

The security manager at the local Spar lives at the flats. He has a son with a monkey on his back. We know him because he steals from us so incompetently - if anything in the house goes missing, we go look for Wesley*. He favours his mother, is tall and ruddy, calls himself coloured rather than indigenous. We're broken in multiple ways. Wesley once drove Joseph*, our weed merchant, a mild-mannered Khoisan to violence, when Wesley tried to bleed the pacman machines Joe was running as a side-hustle. That morning I was walking my dogs and halfway down the block from Joseph's place, met a yelping mass, slowly progressing down to the flats. Although Wesley is almost twice his height, Joseph was steadily kicking him in the ribs, like a deflated soccer ball, mournfully repeating 'don't steal from me, my brother, never steal from me.'

I rushed back to Johannesburg from a reading and research tour in March this year. My people were glad I was home, but fresh from the USA, the corona factory, I seemed to glow with infection. I'd catch them looking at me with a kind of awe mixed with warm pity, as if I was already a memory, a kind of pre-zombie.

Of course none of us ever know one hundred percent when a person's time has come. It's a guess, often uncannily accurate, when the sister-in-law calls and says "you need to come see your mother". A moment where all animosity vanishes, retreating to ferment in time for the funeral. That's when the knives come out.

In February Wesley was imprisoned for shop-lifting at the Pick and Pay. As the virus thickened the air between us, I wondered if he was okay. How would he self-isolate? Our prisons are overcrowded. I was missing him already, wishing he'd say to me 'Auntie don't you have a job for me?' and next thing I'm looking for my radio.

Three weeks ago the government decided to release 19 000 petty criminals, (at the time, we had around 8000 cases – as per this article <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/covid-19-south-africa-grants-parole-to-19-000-inmates/1833867>.) Today on 31 May our WHO World Coronavirus stats put our sufferers up 22 000 to 30,967. This crazy progression makes the decision to relieve the burden on the prison system and allow the harmless criminals to self-isolate, somehow compassionate. To practice the motto - lives are more valuable than property.

Wesley's father is used to sleeping with his eyes open, his wallet under his pillow. How many times he has caught Wesley, one leg out the front door with the TV in his arms. That time he made the boy leave, but it's winter now.

Yesterday I saw Wesley loping down the street, looking fly in his short back and sides and glowing skin. He looks like he's been eating. I must remember to tell the kids to keep an eye on their phones, and not leave anything on the windowsill.

When my son read this piece, he told me not to put it out there. He said it is 'othering' the addict, presenting him as one-dimensional. I guess I should try to get to know Wesley better. I promised my son that if I see Wesley saving a kitten, or carrying an old lady's shopping, or writing a song, I'd include it in the next version. Meanwhile, I'll try feed him, or something.

The instinct to care for your neighbor has been suppressed for so long. Wesley is a *las***, but he is still ours. uMartha says, there is no dustbin for a human being, even for those unloved portions of ourselves. And we are all in the same boat - Africans, Chinese, Americans, Vanautians for God's sake, those countries so remote you'd think them safe from SS Corona. Many have not been spared. Those who manage to stay safe, may write down their unspeakable thoughts. Our current vulnerability – our lack of safety, of certainty – are an opportunity for radical ideas like valuing Black lives, to unconditionally infect us and transform us, once and for all.

*not their real names

** a *las* is an Afrikaans word for a burden, a load or a bother.

Snail

I've fallen into myself, a ball pool of velvet and razor spheres.
Asymptomatic, I flail and fumble and rest in the vaulted
darkness. Only now I notice the brilliance of stars
and the way their distance telescopes constantly
as a hand touches my chest. We've become one,
brightened by the dark shadow that shows us who we are.

Frankly I'd prefer to be outside transacting with the others,
maybe even looting a liquor store. On the surface.
But I'm trapped down here, spinning my solitude
into a web. Not coughing but catching flies, feeding on the rude
energy of life. Ignoring distress. Sucked dry.

At times I feel terror I'll never return. What day is it?
My matter
as consequent as a snail's footprint on the pepper tree's trunk,
a long and silent tear, dried mucous on the patient bark.
And somewhere far from here or maybe near
someone is coughing into their last handkerchief,
attended by a pair of kind latex hands, a masked heart.

I tune into news/disease for there but for the grace of god go I
my mother taught, although an atheist till the end, when
death vacuumed her up, like the dust she hated. She seemed
surprised. I see her still smiling in her own bed, spangled
with stars. It was a relief to stop the suffering. She refused
a funeral because she couldn't see the point. "I won't
be there." Ironically in retrospective solidarity with Iran,
where The Virus buries people en masse, their name engraved
nowhere but on their own rememberer, who
ploughs their footsteps into the tomorrow land leaving
a frail silver t

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https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phillippa_Yaa_de_Villiers