

The Harlot's Cup

(Versifying Love amid COVID-19)

Cornelius Muthuri Tsurie

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Dedication

To the strongest women I know;

My mom, Cecilia Kathei

and

My aunt, Sister Mary Agnes Nkatha

*I take pride in you dear
For when my heart lack cheer
You are always there
To wipe my every tear!*

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Foreword by Eric Tinsay Valles

One's experiences of isolation, longing and uncertainty can be embodied in a profound and intense manner in poetry. Cornelius Muthuri Tsurie's new collection is a sustained poetic reflection on these big themes during the Covid-19 pandemic. Cornelius deftly delineates the fragility of love beyond the mere recording of facts. He internalizes his experiences to wield his imagination to identify with a jilted lover from the ghetto or one separated from his lover during a lockdown. In "One Day," the dramatic speaker longs for a time when "I will obtain mirth in hugging a lover/For the "keep distance," restrictions will be over." In "Hold on Corona," the same dramatic speaker ponders being grounded at home with some whimsy: "Hold on therefore dear Corona/And give me time to love Mona!"

This collection assembles a wide array of experiences from Cornelius's memory and imagination. The poems gathered here fall into two loose themes: love and loss. There are cries of the grief-stricken yearning for romance or family. In "Dear God," the dramatic speaker prays for longevity: "[For t]hat beautiful girl you've given to me,/ Allow me to tarry a little longer/In this wretched earth/For in them the fullness of joy I see." "These poems preserve Cornelius's memories for his loved ones and the next generations. Implicit throughout his poems is a concern about fleeting feelings. Navigating this volatile terrain, Cornelius bares dark forces in his soul, as in "I'm a hustler:" "With hands of iron/ And a heart of a lion/ I'm a survivor in

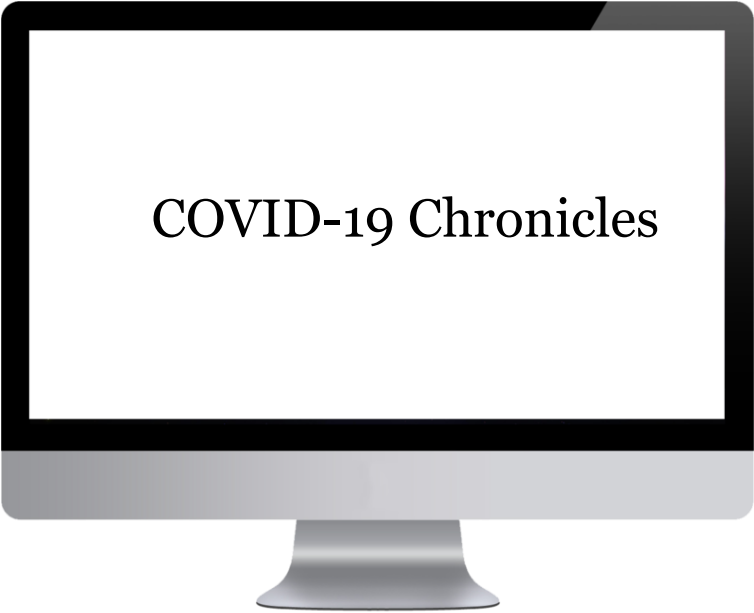
desert/ You can't break my heart.” He charts the meanderings of romantic feelings, even those of women in “Because I’m a Woman.” Cornelius conflates the pandemic with tumultuous relationships with patterns of imagery drawn from the Bible and classical myths.

By weaving together disparate threads of memories and emotions, Cornelius shows the honesty and discipline that I first observed in him at the Kistrech Poetry Festival in Kisii. I hope he could continue to share the poetic task of seeking beauty and hope in times of personal and international crises.

Eric Tinsay Valles is a published poet and director of Poetry Festival Singapore

Acknowledgement

I wish to convey my sincere gratitude to Dr. Eric Tinsay Valles who, despite the preparation and the requirements that he had to meet for his PhD class, spared time to read this collection and to write the foreword. Also, I extend my appreciation to my university classmate Kioko Kyula who constantly read the collection and recommended some prudent changes to the wording and the style before publication. Lastly, to all my WhatsApp friends who would read my poems and encourage me to publish, feel much appreciated.



Twin Souls

I found love in the street
Fleeing the teargas exploding canister
I found love spreading like sheet
When I landed in the hands of a caring gangster

I found love at night
In the twinkling of the heavenly star
I found love flashing its light
When on myself I could run no faster

I found love in travail
When the world was coming to an end
The only love which could avail
When there was no acquainted friend

I found love in the commotion
When people were dreading the curfew
And the love which provoked my emotion
Has been experienced by a few

I found love in solitary
A love I had lost to the pandemic
Loving back I didn't tarry

And the love grew prolific

I found love in the ghetto

When in town I was a fugitive

I found love in Soweto

And here forever I will live!

One Day

One day I will shed tears of joy
When my hopes and happiness
Will be extricated again
I will sing a song of victory
When I'll reunite with my acquaintance
I will cry because the pain will be over
The pain of living in a cage
Everyday living in a cage of misery
Obtaining mirth only in sleep
And when I can't sleep any longer
I'm subjected to anguish,
Hunger pangs not vanquished

One day I will hug my friends
I will shake hands with my family
I will wash not only my hands
But I will also wash my future
That has grown dim
In the fight for survival
From a threatening pandemic
Spreading like veld fires
And from the hunger sickness
That is killing like the pandemic

I will visit places
Places I never visited before;
The hunger-stricken places
Because the lockdown has taught me
The magnitude of the hunger pangs
I've learned a lesson in this period,
When the pandemic ends
I will exercise the lesson in the field

I will feed people
I will grow generous

One day I will fall in love
I have been falling asleep
In the bed of sorrows
Solitary my only companion
Couldn't give enough
Of what loving people can,
I have had enough of unrequited love
A phantasmagoric love in fantasy
A love that could drive me crazy,
True love in books but not in reality.
I will obtain mirth in hugging a lover
For the "keep distance," restrictions will be over

I will disarray the mask one day
A mask that almost suffocated me
As I panted running in the curfew hours
A mask I wear from the fear of corps
Corps wearing mask only to claw
The flesh of the poor people,
I will wear a face of joy
That has been veiled by the mask
People will see me smiling
I will see people smiling
And life will be beautiful again!

Hold on Corona

Hold on Corona!
A new bird has just flipped
Her beautiful wings
On my innocent heart
She has aroused my emotion
And awakened my love again

I've got confident
That this feeling will last
Because she has blown my worries
And my fear to love away
She has not uttered with her lips
But I could see in her eyes
The regard I longed for
I could also read on her face
The caring words of her unspoken heart.

Hold on your threat
And give me time to put this
Burning emotion
To the test of time
This caring intention
That has developed,
I want it to be reciprocated.
Hold on therefore dear Corona
And give me time to love Mona!



Crushing

I want to know this;
When you have a crush on someone,
Does your heart shrink?
Is it all fun?
Or a sort of wild bewilderment

I'm a victim
Yes, insomnia victim
Bereft of appetite and sense
I'm trapped!
Brigade, I enlist your defense,

Before I plunge deep
And slate my brain of reason
Before I cast deep my affection
And pledge
To love forever this person

But before I bind forever
The shackles of life with her
For better or for worse
I desire an assurance
Of love from her!

A Bad Boy

I'm a bad boy
Your mama warned you against
I'm a bad boy
A suspect of an attempted heist
What do you know about me?
Beyond the scars in my skin, you see

Your mama hates me for naught
She incited you to hate me with passion
When all my life to disclose I was about
Why have you grown weak suddenly?
Despite the promise to carry on strongly

I saw a strong woman in you
So, I was utterly deceived?
I saw a bright future in us two
But all women are the same
Save my one mama's name

I regret singing your praises
To my brothers in the ghetto
Our affair has turned into a crisis

And I can sing your praises no more
Please take your memories with you as you go

I don't want to remember your cruel kind
I hate your beautiful proud face
What kindness in you did I find?
When human heart to you is no near
When urchin's animosity in you is crystal clear

I once got a mama too
Unlike yours she was indiscriminating
She loved and she helped me get through
She was rich and independent
To a man, she was never a dependent

I have retched twice to vomit
The nasty feeling towards you I'm experiencing
I hate you is all I want to admit
Why did you disguise yourself in humility?
When the pride in you is beyond infinity

Is it your father's wealth that is making you proud?
Soon a cow will make an abode in your home
And you will abide in the former uncertain cow's compound
You will never carry wealth to eternity

Brag only in the sense of humanity.

I fought hard to retain mama's status

When she was being disarrayed her dress and her wealth

I fought hard but I couldn't beat the haters

And when later I became conscious

Mama's death saw me inauspicious

Your warm adolescent blood deceived you

And then you decided to deceive me

I thought your love was true

But again, you trivialized my heart

And exposed it to a soothing hurt!

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