

You can't breathe water

Olumide Popoola

We were waiting. For a reaction. When we, hundreds of us, were drowning at sea. We trailed through the social media timelines, we listened in on conversations and checked for newly founded WhatsApp groups to 'finally do something'. We were waiting, no, hoping, for a voice rising against – for something, a little empathy.

You can't breathe water.

You can't announce your drowning.

If someone is trying to record, document our demise up close, they too will end up amongst the fishes and algae. Dead. And you know full well that mobiles don't operate well under water. Not the ones we are carrying.

The sea holds so much unspeakable. Even we cannot speak to it, in its entirety.

Drowning tends to be a quiet, silent act. Victims do not usually thrash. Instead they expend significant energy trying to keep their head above water and may be too tired to shout for help; moreover, if water comes into contact with the vocal cords, they can go into spasm and prevent the victim from shouting

for help. Often, the victim is found floating or at the bottom of the body of water...¹

Of course, shouting is a tricky thing when the one we might be shouting for is determined not to hear. When boats and dinghies are driven away from your shores, prevented from making it to the mainland... futile to shout for you.

We know you are tired. Tired of groups of people arriving, us, people like us. We arrive needy and unconnected. You are called, your humanity is questioned because you don't want to share what you have. You need what you have. We understand. Most of us are like that, concerned with ourselves.

It's just, while we were not thrashing, and could not shout and were experiencing spasms, what we thought of was Britain. That same country leaving the EU? The people who wanted their country back and we were still debating what that could possibly mean?

You were never the ones who carried us. Not in any real significant numbers.

Do you remember, a few years back, when the summer lull was invigorated with endless news items of us arriving? Groups of us trying to reach mainland Europe, or dock among the islands – although docking does not quite describe it. More often it was a messy scramble, us setting foot on solid ground, drenched and scared, some of us with children in our arms. Remember? We enlivened the slow summer with running for trains or trying to jump onto lorries in Calais to make it across the channel. To you people.

¹ www.medicinenet.com/drowning/article.htm

*Black people become the carriers of terror, terror's embodiment... the ground of terror's possibility globally.*²

We wanted you.

We decided it had to be one of two things that was responsible for the constant replay of us running. Either there was no other news to cow the population with, and we understood that it is always good to keep fear alive. How better to rule over people than when they are scared? The other possibility is that you were doing things, passing laws that you did not want attention drawn to and we were useful distraction, helpers you might say. A veil between accountability and you. That too was valid and, although a common trick, we understood that you would not want to change what's already tried and tested.

*... those Black people transmigrating the African continent toward the Mediterranean and then to Europe who are imagined as insects, swarms, vectors of disease; familiar narratives of danger and disaster that attach to our always already weaponized Black bodies (the weapon is blackness).*³

We were a dramatic picture. Even we have to admit that. In that loop of an edited video stream of images: the invasion of the invaders, colonisation of the colonisers – *'They're pouring in!'*

Yet, some people still imagine time is not circular? This is the most full-circle you will ever get. Well, we think there might be more to it now that you have your country back, of course. Finally, it is you only. By yourselves. Just as you wanted.

² Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake. On Blackness and Being*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, p.15.

³ *Ibid.* p.15 ff.

Your Home Secretary is concerned, very much so, that we should stay on the French side of the Channel. She praised the drones, the radar, all your technology for surveillance. The police. All the efforts to keep us out. And this time you don't see us running, not on the Newsnight video clips. There's the odd picture of us, defiant, still on boats, still trying to come. To you. But this is not where our stories end. Hardly. You know that.

It takes a full sixty seconds for an adult to drown. Twenty seconds for a child. It's quick, no time to make an appeal. You exist, you capsize, you drown. Or should we say, *we*, for clarity? *We* drown so much that a spokesperson for Alarm Phone, the hotline for migrants in distress, says 'this is a massacre at Europe's borders'.⁴

Someone from the medical team of the Italian NGO Emergency, on board *Open Arms*, the only rescue boat operating in the Central Mediterranean, said:

*All this...a few kilometres away from an indifferent Europe...They instead continue to bury their heads in the sand, pretending not to see the cemetery that the Mediterranean Sea has become.*⁵

We are thinking of time. Time passing, time arriving, time repeating itself. Is this too abstract?

Do you know that Sahé Sephore was the first undocumented migrant to be buried formally with both her name and surname on a tombstone in the Canaries?⁶ There is a picture of her on that tombstone. Her cheeks are round and yummy, and everyone wants to play with her

⁴ www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/12/bodies-of-74-migrants-wash-up-on-libyan-beach

⁵ www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/12/bodies-of-74-migrants-wash-up-on-libyan-beach?fbclid=IwAR1yoEAOMFSdt6V1ycINAIcB85xb5IILBZoVHE_j4b-lwujlQtZjZRx5DM

⁶ www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-55143046

because we just know she was cheeky, in the good sense of the word. She was 13 months old when she drowned near the coast of Gran Canaria in May 2019. We mourn, we hold her. In our arms below sea level. It is important to have a name. Hers is there now, in writing. Still, when we search for her, we can't find anything online, other than the one news item that includes a picture of her tombstone with a photo. You don't give us much space. Outside of the videos and pictures you like.

There is another name that echoes prominently for us. Again, not in your land, not even on your shores. But we think it might all be connected, just like time. His name is Mohamed Hassan and he was 12. He never made it onto the boats. He didn't make it out of Egypt where he was one of many Sudanese refugees. He was stabbed to death by an Egyptian man. The peaceful protests that followed, crying out for justice for him, demanding an end to violence and discrimination, were dispersed violently by the state. Officers hurling racial and xenophobic slurs while arresting protestors.⁷

And here it is, what we think you might understand. The link. Voices that don't like us, that have so much to say – some of what is said would come under hate crime – names they call us that are not ours and often fall foul of the law. This, the name-calling, changing us into something else. We are no longer persons but an undifferentiated mass, a problem that can be discarded. We are, of course, not with you, we are neither here nor there. We are treading water, not quite sinking because we have stories to tell, names to call. We have some urgent matters to take up with you.

For one, we are concerned with the children. Especially now that you in the UK are all by yourselves, without the baggage that is the EU and

⁷ www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/nov/12/dozens-of-sudanese-migrants-held-in-cairo-after-protests

its laws. There seem to be some breaks with your Prime Minister's promises to allow unaccompanied minors to be reunited with their families in the UK. To protect those children who don't have families in your country, who are alone, unaccompanied. He promised he would receive them. Well, not personally. We cannot expect that. We don't. We are not unreasonable or delusional. We had visions for the future, but they don't go that far.

The Prime Minister said that you leaving the EU, you getting your big wish, would not affect our children. Those alone. They would still be able to come, even after you had left the EU. Yet, we hear there are unresolved issues and quite a few children and their families would be refused entry. To your land. The island. We would appreciate if you could take the time to address this. Urgently, we want to say, but we know we don't have anything to bargain with.

We are ready to speak about the future. We are wondering what yours will be.

Will you be happy? Now you set your own immigration quotas? The brilliant surveillance equipment that the Home Secretary is so fond of will help with that, the last hurdle, should any of us still make it as close as the French side of the Channel. And you know we will. For a while at least, we still believe in you, reach out to you. Perhaps your surprise will be that you're not free to go to other countries anymore, that you'll start needing visas? But that won't keep you out, we know that. Why would it? You wanted your country back. You never said you didn't want to go to other peoples' countries. That is different.

There are a few things we don't speak much about. We too want our countries back. Real ones. We won't bore you with all that just now, having taken up too much of your time already.

The future, we said. What is there to come? We have told you about our hopes and dreams. Often. Some of those dreams were tied up with

you, trying at least to get to you. What are your dreams? Just in case the big one, sovereignty, ends up a bit like ours. With the fish.

Let us know. You know where to find us.

We are not going anywhere.

Olumide Popoola

London-based Olumide Popoola is a Nigerian-German writer. Her publications include essays, poetry, the novella *this is not about sadness*, the play *Also by Mail*, and the short story collection *breach*, which she co-authored with Annie Holmes, as well as recordings in collaboration with musicians. Her critically acclaimed novel *When We Speak of Nothing* was published by Cassava Republic Press in 2017.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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