

POEM

"My Mother Got Annoyed"ⁱ

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"My mother got annoyed"
and killed herself in Karamoja—
an oblivion in the savanna.

It is one respondent's story from the field—
anthropological demography—
echoed by Sandra Gray,

a death diced
as a data point.
We might think

annoyances are some small things,
they rub the wrong way—
but to self-kill? Is it irritability?

That's more behavioral,
kindled developmentally
or traumatically.

Categorically,
Gray wrote, the suicide
is linked to loss or dispute.

She was beaten by her husband who raids cattle.
Husbands here carry Kalashnikovs to battles
over animal husbandry.

From this, the day before her suicide,
the respondent said, her mother had a swollen side.
She had miscarried.

To be a senior wife and mother is a hollow honor
among violent husbands' others wives and mothers,
who want meat and the milk of life.

Despite theories of acquired suicidal capability,
her death is a minority
in Karamoja. Mustafa

Mirzelerⁱⁱ, like Gray, says "to be annoyed" is
a common translation of a common phrase
that also means "bad person."

Ghost of the plateaus, a note
nicked in pencil, a life dulled
and a death captured

in an imperfect register—
"my mother got annoyed"—
a catastrophe
one cannot unread.

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ⁱ This poem is based on panel discussions and a quote from a paper by Dr. Sandra Gray presented at the 115th American Anthropological Association's meetings in Minneapolis, titled "My Mother Got Annoyed": Ethnographic Discourse and Narratives of Suicide in Karamoja."

ⁱⁱDr. Mustafa Mirzeler, an anthropologist specializing East African folklore, shared this translation after Dr. Gray's presentation.