

## “Global Health in Malawi: a Collection of Poems”

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### I TENACITY

The ancient Baobab  
stands sentry in the hospital courtyard.  
Its limbs, twisted and gnarled,  
cling hopelessly to dying leaves,  
desiccated  
by the oppressive Malawian heat.  
Yet still it stands,  
blanketing the budding lilies  
in its protective shade,  
while the ruddy midday sun  
beats down upon its back.  
And still it stands.

### II SUNSHINE

The sun burns brighter here, somehow.  
A ball of liquid fire in an opalescent sky,  
blanketing ebony shoulders  
in its blistering rays,  
as they adapt to its nagging presence  
like the tongue  
grows accustomed to repeated burns.

The color of Africa is green.  
Its landscapes undulate slowly,  
hills coalescing into a single rolling mass,  
an emerald line tracing through the sky,  
like the rise and fall of a chest  
as it expires  
its final breath:  
endless, until it's gone.

Mud huts with thatched roofs sprinkle grassy plains,  
drop cookies arranged haphazardly on the sheet,

growing and expanding into one another,  
as they bake slowly in the afternoon heat.

Some huts are brick, with corrugated roofs.  
Business and economy class residences  
share in the wealth of the luscious land.  
But where is first class?  
That's back in the city,  
with conditioned air,  
color TV,  
and a complimentary in-flight snack,  
prepared by  
the hired help.

### III HER SOUL LEFT ON BUTTERFLY WINGS

The end came suddenly:  
with an onrush of silence  
like the crash of breakers  
against a rock-strewn shore,  
the echoes of her agony  
hanging limply in the air,  
punctuated  
by a receding drumbeat,  
a fluttering of the eyes,  
and one final, sharp intake of air  
as the bleeding ceased,  
the pain subsided,  
and her soul,  
terrified yet eager,  
took flight  
through an open window,  
leaving her body,  
peaceful,  
and blanketed in the tawny rays  
of afternoon sun.

#### IV ON THE WARDS

The halls are suffused with a thick heat:  
viscous and palpable  
like a dampened towel  
draped over your face.  
The air hangs in oppressive sheets,  
stagnating,  
each breath a newfound struggle,  
thick fingers 'round your neck.

Sunshine cascades through open windows;  
rays of liquid gold  
swath the sick in a ocher aura,  
a deceitful juxtaposition  
to the bottomless shadows  
within their sunken eyes.

Bodies fill the beds,  
and spill over onto stone floors –  
decrepit mattresses sagging  
despite the lack of weight.  
No blankets or pillows here,  
just a headache and a stiff neck,  
skeletal forms exuding cachexia,  
snaking along pale walls in one great cue,  
as if lined up for admission  
to some hot new film.

Physicians also wind through the halls,  
navigating uncharted masses  
with the cautious eye of a seasoned explorer.  
They step over corpses;  
trays of cold mush;  
and lakes of bodily fluid;  
unable to tell the dead  
from the dying –  
the line between,  
so thin.

The shrill wails of the grieving  
echo rhythmically through the halls:  
a periodic announcement,  
piercing and punctual,  
like a cuckoo-clock  
for the dead.

It's a world beyond saving,  
or, at least, prohibited by cost:  
a careening ship  
with all lifeboats lost,  
a smoke alarm bleating  
yet all exits are blocked.  
A place defined by words  
like futility,  
inevitability,  
and *I'm sorry,*  
*he's gone.*

#### V FROM TEMPEST, TRANQUILITY

Stop.  
Listen to the silence.  
Hold your breath  
and feel the stillness in the air.  
Take note of your heartbeat,  
the ticking of your watch,  
and the echoes of  
the receding storm.

Don't forget the agony:  
the cries of pain,  
the hot tears upon her face,  
the reluctance to let go;  
never forget the suffering.  
But *remember* the silence.