

## Pitone's Journey

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When unnamed terrorists shot down the airplane carrying President Habyarimana of Rwanda in April, 1994, the small central African nation exploded. The assassination of the president became the flash point for centuries-old violence between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups. The Hutu attempted an ethnic cleansing which amounted to nothing short of genocide. Those who could run for their lives in what became a mass exodus. The following true story is the account of one 37-year-old Rwandan woman, Pitone Gatorano, as she fled from the capital of Kigali at the height of the war. Although running for her life, Gatorano nonetheless searched for her parents and other family members. This piece of writing is part of a larger work about the entire family's separation, isolation, hopelessness, escape, and resettlement in the United States.

名称不詳のテロリストが、ルワンダのハビアリマナ大統領を乗せた飛行機を撃墜した1994年4月、中央アフリカのこの小国は炸裂した。大統領の暗殺はフツ族とツチ族の間の幾世紀にもわたる紛争の火種に油を注ぐことになった。フツ族によるツチ族の掃討はまさにジェノサイドであった。命からがら逃げ出すことができたものは大量難民となった。次に述べるのは37歳のルワンダ人女性、ピトン ガトラノが戦争の最中、ルワンダの首都キガリから逃げ出すときにその身に実際に起こった話である。命懸けの逃走にもかかわらず、ガトラノは両親その他の家族を探し求めた。これは一家離散、孤独、失意、逃亡、そして米國移住にいたる長い物語の一部である。

Pitone walked mostly at night, led by the soft, yellow light of the moon, and the mossy, muddy smell of the river. As she walked, she often thought of the mythical Tangalimlibo, the daughter of the second wife of an old tribal chief. Thoughts of Tangalimlibo kept Pitone moving through the darkness, kept her mind on her footsteps, distracting her from her fears.

Tangalimlibo's mother, who had been barren for many years, became pregnant upon receiving a special nut from a bird who visited her as she worked the garden. Tangalimlibo was her mother's special love, her precious gift from the bird. As a result, she maintained a rigid guard over her child. According to the myth, Tangalimlibo's mother only allowed her to play at night for fear of being hurt by her father's first wife's jealousy. And so it was that as she grew older, her chores were also done only at night. Every night Tangalimlibo walked to the river, by the light of the moon, to fetch the family's water.

Eventually, Tangalimlibo married and delivered a strong, healthy son. She continued her life of daylight ensconce and moonlight existence. But one day, she was forced by her father-in-law to go to the river in the bright light of day. The spirit of the river swallowed her up, taking her from her husband who missed her dearly. Pitone thought about the great war spirit who had swallowed up so many in her family, taking them from her. But the water spirit in the river in the ancient myth continued to give life to Tangalimlibo's son, and eventually returned Tangalimlibo to the earth as a healthy woman, richly blessed by the spirit world.

Pitone's family would not be returned, of that she was sure. The war spirit was an evil one and would never be so kind as to bless and return.

As Pitone's newly callused feet slapped along the road in steady determination, she thought about the guiding light of the moon, and the guiding spirits of the river in her life, and in mythical Tangalimlibo's. She knew she was surrounded by holy spirits and that she would be protected on this, her destined journey.

Haunted by dark shadows in the forest nearby and by rustling sounds in the tall grasses and hilly crevices, Pitone stayed at the edge of the woods and kept her

mind focused on her mythical sister. "Like Tangalimlibo, I too am 'one who walks by Moonlight."

By dawn, Pitone moved into the forest for rest. She slept in the cool, dark shade of the jungle growth which lulled and comforted her by day, despite its haunting tricks at night. She knew the murdering rebels were regrouping somewhere nearby; she knew some were running to the same hills and tangled vegetation to sleep off their drunken frenzies, others to slash a final limb from an innocent victim. Yet she could see the images that went with the sounds in the daylight, and she trusted the leaves to hide her well. Despite being in the center of a war zone without rules, Pitone felt protected by the tall grasses on the hills of her mother's people, just as she had felt as an infant nestled in the soft hills of her mother's breasts.

Weary from hunger and fatigue, Pitone would slip into the sorghum groves at sunrise, parting the grasses and climbing the hills until she found a spot she thought was unclaimed by both animals and militiamen.

She swept her long arms over the tops of the grass, then froze her frail body, trapping thin breath beneath the surface of her breast bone. She strained her ears, listening for suspicious sounds. Only her eyes darted around, surveying the entry to the forest behind her, and as far into the darkness as her eyes and imagination and fine-tuned senses could take her.

Finally, her shoulders rose as she took in more air and sank again as she emptied her lungs. Long graceful fingers met at her belly and drove into the poetic silence of the bronze and green blades of her daytime mattress. She parted the silky stalks with the arrow of her hands and dove them downward, head and body flowing behind in natural succession. She curled into a ball and carefully pulled the grassy curtain above her head closed, hiding all signs of her presence.

Checking to see that there were no spaces among the tips of the blades, Pitone noticed how, from her vantage point on the surface of the earth, the grasses and the trees all around her seemed to be stretching to the sky. The subtle movements of the near-still air made it look as if they had tiny hands and were reaching, reaching to the heavens.

But in the short moments before sleep overtook her, Pitone wondered about the heavens; did they hold the souls of her mother and father, her siblings, her husband, her babies; or were there no heavens, only a raging god and a joyous devil.

Sleep moved in like a prowling tigress, lapping up tiny bits of fatigue; her muscles twitched away the tensions like cows switching flies as they stood in the sun. Sleep stole the answer to her question about the heavens and pushed the question away until the next morning when she would lie down again in a different spot in a different forest surrounded by the same comfort, threatened by the same whispers and shadows.

A black bird screamed over her head and Pitone awoke with a start, jumping to a crouching position, still covered by the green blades. She listened to the bird calling over and over until finally it was answered by a mate from deep in the woods and it flew off between the majestic trees. Pitone looked toward the mouth of the woods and on out into the open space of the civilized road. She stood and began her journey for the sixth night.

It was just turning to dusk as she neared her home village. As if on a runner's second wind, Pitone's body surged with false energy. She would go straight to the family home at all costs, no more hiding or running. She walked on in a straight and determined way. Her shoulders pulled forward, hips pushed out, eyes starring ahead with such power and insanity that she was almost machine-like as she clipped away the final few miles.

At last, her family house stood on the horizon. Pitone's hands swelled from the heat, doubled by her nerves. Her neck stiffened and a hard, dry rock began to grow in

her throat. She stepped onto the porch and opened the screen door. It slammed shut behind her; she jumped. The house was in shambles. Furniture was overturned, the refrigerator was open and flat on its side, its contents spilled, curdled and rotten on the floor. A sour stench caused her nostrils to flare open and her thick tongue to swell over the lump that grew in the back of her throat. She stepped over broken glass and pieces of ripped fabric from clothing, curtains, even furniture.

Pitone tried in vain not to see, through watered eyes, the smeared blood stains on the floor, the walls, the sink, even the air. The blood followed her wherever she stepped or looked. She could feel the splattered blood rise from the surfaces and close in on her; she could feel the blood in her own hair, dripping down her back, behind her teeth and between her toes.

Pitone stood in the living room for a very long time. She barely moved, but slowly inched her eyes around the room, stepping around herself. Her fisted hands knotted around the belly of her dress, wringing and twisting and pulling at the worn, cotton threads. Her forehead knotted, her eyes held pools of salty human fluid in their bottom lip; tiny, high-pitched cries resonated in her head and escaped through her nose.

She looked at the back door and tilted her head ever so slightly. Taking slow, tiny, scooting steps, she moved toward it. The door flew open as she approached and she stepped out, leaning on the broken railing of the porch. The stale violence of the now wild garden stared back at her. The banana palms were strung with echoes of human memories, the mango and orange trees were hacked and damaged. The land that had always securely held the fruit trees like fingers around a flowering blossom had always been green and well manicured; now it was wild with twisted weeds as if it were rising from ashes, screaming into the silence.

Pitone's eyes were drawn to the papaya trees in the garden. Ah, such an abundance of the soft, oval fruit. Dangling from the branches, they glistened in the sun like rich, royal diamonds. She could almost see the sweet juice dripping from within the fleshy skins. She stepped onto the rock path her mother had laid in the garden years ago and reached up to take one of the sweet nourishing gifts to her breast.

Just as her palm touched the warm, velvety fruit, she sniffed, as if stifling a cry. She did it again, and again. Then her mind began to register the odor that was grabbing at her senses. Her eyes fell to the floor of the garden, and through the weeds she saw the naked, decapitated bodies of fifty or more of the orphaned children her mother had cared for in recent years.

Pitone collapsed into the dust. She gagged and spat in a desperate fit, and finally she produced a small drop of yellow bile which fell onto the broken porch boards. . .