

The Revolving City

51 POEMS & THE STORIES BEHIND THEM

EDITED BY WAYDE COMPTON & RENÉE SAROJINI SAKLIKAR



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TO THOSE WHO MAKE TIME AND SPACE FOR POETRY

We would like to acknowledge that Vancouver is located on unceded
Indigenous land belonging to the Coast Salish peoples.



bunch poems AT SFU



Stuff to do When Your Hometown is Burning

1. Finish up your cup of tea before it gets cold because you know you hate it cold.
2. Think about calling your mother.
3. Don't call your mother. She'll freak out. Asking questions like hail pelting down, like pepper sneezed into your face, like unrelenting projectile vomit on your recently cleaned carpet. Don't call you mother. She'll freak out as if you knew much more than the headlines proclaim: Gulu is in Flames.
4. Change the channel. Change. Change. Change. Nothing. None of the news media will carry it, and why should they? Gulu is burning, but does not even warrant a lined script flowing at the bottom of your TV screen.
5. Return to the internet site. Read the article again. Gulu is Burning. Still burning. Same title renders the burning a continuous and never-ending act—Gulu is hell.
6. Email a friend. Enclose the link.
7. Read your friend's response—oh dear.
8. Oh dear you, oh dear me, oh dear everything around you—scattered books on the table, papers, receipts from a cup of coffee and muffin that you hated, the latest *O Magazine* proclaiming secrets to a long and joyful life complete with beautiful skin—your hometown is burning.
9. The dishes are stacked up in the sink. They always are. Grape stalks on the kitchen counter, coffee grinds on the floor by the trash can. A damp kitchen cloth. Your hometown is burning.
10. The face of a woman you know appears on the computer devoid of any apparent emotion. What does it feel like when your hometown is burning? How can you show it? Where are the t-shirts, the arm bands, the YouTube clips, the tweets, the letter writers, the dissenters, the peace lovers, the protesters, the batons, the loudspeakers, the police, the guns, the tear gas, the burning tires in the middle of the road, the pickup trucks, goons throwing politicians to the back of the track and speeding away? Where are the signs that your hometown is burning?
11. Pink and yellow tulips in a vase. Not any less gorgeous, even as dead stalks that cling to any semblance of life—opening up to the light through the blinds and closing up in the evening, sucking at what juices might be mixed in the water.
12. Wash some dishes.
13. Shower.
14. Fix your hair.
15. Wear lipstick.
16. Remember to take your shades—it's sunny outside.
17. Call your mother.
18. Listen to your mother freak out just like you thought she would. Why should this be happening to us again, why? When did it start? Who is doing this? Not again, she wails, not again.
19. Gulu is in flames as the fourth division pours out into the streets showing firepower, manly power, deadly, manly firepower.
20. Your hometown is burning. So you take the bus, go to work, mark papers, submit a short story and think about dinner.

—w—

On April 16, 2011, both major Ugandan national newspapers, *New Vision* and *Daily Monitor* carried headlines on the deadly walk-to-work protests in my hometown of Gulu. These protests had begun earlier in the year, led by a political opposition leader, Kizza Besigye, to protest the high costs of fuel and food. The Ugandan government had reacted firmly, with the army called in to tear gas, beat protesters and even use rubber bullets. Several people in the capital city Kampala were hurt, including a pregnant woman who was hauled into the back of a truck and taken away, and the fatal shooting of a two-year-old. It was only in Gulu that the Fourth Division of the Uganda People's Defence Force used live bullets and killed three people at the protests. The leader of the Democratic Party, Nobert Mao, was roughed up and arrested.

In April, 2011, loads of things were happening internationally. Hosni Mubarak, the former Egyptian president had resigned earlier that month, motioning towards the dominoes of protests that would eventually spread across Africa and the Middle East. Watching these events from the west coast, the same as I've been watching the events that take place in Uganda for most of my adult life was and is an uncanny experience. You feel as if you know and yet you don't know, can't know what it is to be there. It is unsettling; it disrupts the otherwise regular flow of your day, making it impossible to disregard the relationship between the flutter in your belly and the storm at home. There is an undeniable connection beyond nostalgia, whether one admits it to others or not.

When I read about the walk-to-work protests, I imagined that peaceful resistance to the Ugandan government was a sign that the system was working out its kinks. Details like rubber bullets and tear gas matched the security organs from other protest cities, as did the seemingly brand new army uniforms, bulletproof vests, batons, face shields, shiny black boots and remarkable restraint, considering. Sometimes a moment like Cairo can be imagined everywhere—people have the power, the people are the power. So what happens when the people's power cannot withstand bullets, or fire, or tankers bearing down on scores of human bodies?

When I read about the the Fourth Division of the UPDF opening fire on protesters in Gulu, I got caught up in a strange vortex that remains determined by distance, modern technical advancements, and the north/south power relations

between media houses that control what is and what isn't news. There it was, a national army firing on protesters with live bullets and it seemed important but it wasn't—no local or international news channel available to me was carrying it. It seemed incredulous, but it wasn't—the world around me was detached, no one was talking about it, nothing stopped to witness or commiserate. At the same time, this became a point of connection with people who remain invisible because they're defined by origins outside the navel centre, that sign of an umbilicus that used to be a lifeline but is now a focus for fascination and distraction from what else matters.