



Small Rocks

writing by people made destitute by the immigration system

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Preface

Before Nations

The story of humankind begins with migration: as a species we fanned out of Africa and settled across the world. Thanks to the advancement of studies in DNA, wherever we are in the world, we can all trace our roots back to those original African migrants.

Before Border Controls

In the twenty-first century, we exist comfortably with multiple identities. Indeed, if, at the dawn of network theory, we were at only six degrees of separation from one another, that is now becoming five degrees, is becoming four. We are all inextricably linked. How far back need one go along one's family tree to find a branch that is grafted from other shores?

Before Immigration Acts

Wars, natural disasters, the quest for a life less harsh, provide the impetus for migration. And with these moving people comes a movement of ideas, of ways of seeing, ways of doing. The news that an 16 year Iraqi refugee, settled in Sweden, may have found a unique solution to a mathematical puzzle that has had mathematicians scratching their heads for 300 years is surprising and yet not so. Einstein himself was a refugee. Many great poets and artists have produced great art in seeing the commonplace through foreign eyes.

Before Quotas

The stories in this anthology are stories told in the voice of those arriving fresh to UK shores. And yet they are stories as

old as the hills, and, if we think about it, they are the stories of each and every one of us.

Before Deportation Orders

I would like to thank Lydia Besong from RAPAR for all the work she put in and the authors, without whose efforts this collection would not exist. Unfortunately, as they have a well founded fear of the authorities, most of them have chosen to remain anonymous. We have therefore decided to publish the whole collection as hidden but revealed voices.

Peter Kalu, Commonword

Introductions

Among writers, it is generally accepted that writing is hard. The struggle to transform amorphous ideas and memories into coherent, cohesive text is not an easy process. If writing is hard for people with relatively secure living conditions, for those living on the edge of the society, without a welfare safety net, writing is almost impossible. How can you find the time and will to write when your day to day survival is in question, when you don't know where you'll be sleeping that night or from whom you will have to beg the next meal?

Yet, it is people on the edge who are most in need of the catharsis that self-expression through writing brings. Tracing the narratives of their interrupted lives can be an essential means of re-establishing the patterns of meaning that give our lives a context where hope can reside. Most of all, writing to be published can give someone a sense that, despite the Kafkaesque machinations of the asylum system, despite the ubiquitous propaganda of hate from the media, despite all the messages telling them that they are worthless, the lives of indigent people have value and meaning. Their stories, both mundane and heroic, are stories that can touch the reader's heart.

Segun Lee-French, Community Arts North West

Refugees are not born – we/they are made. Likewise the indigent: people with names and lives who, exposed to British government treatment that assigns us/them sub-human legal status, continue to maintain and affirm our/their bodies, our/their minds and our/their spirits. Once an asylum claim is refused this becomes an even greater daily struggle: immigration and wider political processes are consciously applied through the structures of the statutory, private and voluntary or third sectors to undermine basic human rights, including the right to be heard.

RAPAR has worked with refugees since 2001. We have witnessed at first hand the hostility and violence directed towards us/them, individually and as a group. We exist to actively analyse and challenge this hostility and help people to collectively tell our/their stories and find ways of sustaining our/themselves. This publication is an achievement for many of those involved simply because to speak out is to reopen old wounds and traumas. We do this to raise awareness and to clarify the reality of being made destitute by the British immigration system, to encourage and to challenge the wider communities to act, not as the law but as their consciences determine.

Voltaire reminds us, *it is dangerous to be right when those in power are wrong*. British state actions towards people it deems unworthy of justice is a second persecution and its representatives continuously demonstrate that they are either unwilling or feel unable, as individuals, to protect those who become its victims. This persecution can only succeed when its targets are silent and remain isolated. If that silence is shattered, that isolation broken down, then very different stories can unfold. The recent experience of escape from destitution that

has been lived out by one of the people centrally involved in creating this collection, Lydia Besong, and by everyone who has surrounded her, spoken about her and written about her, is a contemporary example of how to change the story – from the destitution of today to the determined and inspiring collective action of tomorrow.

Dr Rhetta Moran, on behalf of RAPAR

The house had many entrances

I have cooked him breakfast and now he is shouting at me. He stands in the doorway shouting. He shouts that he was unable to sleep. His eyes have turned grey like steel balls. He works for ten hours, from eight o'clock in the morning and I scream at night. I have nightmares and I scream in my sleep. He cannot live with my bad dreams. He takes what I have cooked and throws the plate in the bin. He takes his coat from the chair. The pocket is torn.

“You cannot keep waking me up every night, son of a dog. You have no use if you keep waking me up every night.”

He puts on his coat and makes his hands into fists. He has large fists. His hair looks untidy. He fingers the torn pocket.

“Wash my socks. When I come back it will be ready and don't forget that.”

This house has two entrances. The house I escaped from had many entrances. The man from the Home Office asked questions like he had something in his mouth, like he was rolling a bullet on his tongue.

“Where did you meet her?” he asked.

I described the house to him in detail. One entrance at the front. A separate entrance for guests. One door at the back leading to the place where they fed the cattle. He was wealthy

and he had many good cattle, not lame or diseased. She would feed the cattle so that is where she came out. She fed the cattle on her own. That is how we would meet.

I told him that in our culture when the parents find out that their daughter is having a relationship with a stranger they kill both girl and boy. There is no choice. Even I am alive but she is dead. My family protected me. I have a photograph of her funeral. The women buried her. The women did not want her to die.

I wanted us to be married. I mentioned this to my mother. I told her I wanted to marry the girl and she told me that this could not be arranged. It would be an insult. Her family was a wealthy family and her father was a former commander. We were not suitable. My mother told me this and looked at her hands. They were clean and looked older than she did. We were people who worked on the land. Because of the difference in status my mother refused.

She would feed the cattle. They had one door leading to where they fed the cattle so that is where she came out. Her father when he was a commander killed several members of our Sayed sect. We are all muslim but we were Sayed sect. We knew the people he killed when he was Mujahidin. We lived all of us in the same village. Even he had killed people we knew we all of us lived in the same village. He had men in attendance who carried guns. Everyone in Afghanistan has a gun. He kept ten or twelve men everywhere that he went who carried guns. She would come out to feed the cattle and that was when we would meet.

The man from the Home Office looked at me and kept rolling the bullet on his tongue.

“When did you meet?” He asked. “When was the first time you met her?”

We met during our relation’s wedding. We ourselves were not related. At the wedding people came from the surrounding area. That is the tradition, to celebrate and out of respect. We met at the wedding and from that time I had a friendship with this girl. We met daily sometimes, sometimes every second day. Sometimes for thirty minutes, other times for an hour. She would become nervous and have to leave. She would not look back in case anyone was watching. To her father she was only a woman.

Unless you have lived in Afghanistan you cannot imagine. There is nothing that is the same here. In the village there are farms where there are shelters built for cattle. That is where we would meet. We wanted to talk. We knew of the danger but when you are young you find it difficult to understand what that means. We had not seen anyone killed. The danger was like watching them slaughter a goat. We talked only, we were close to each other, we did not have any sexual contact. Until her brother saw us I myself had not had any problems from her family.

In the past our elders were afraid of her father. He had a lot of weapons. From the time of the Mujahidin he had a lot of weapons. He has fewer weapons now but our elders are still afraid of him. He targeted my tribe. In Afghanistan the tribes fight each other. They live in the same village and they

continue to fight. Over a boy and a girl they will fight. Khan Mohammad lost honour. In our culture that is a reason to fight.

Her family attended a wedding. I discovered them on the road. I walked with them part of the way. Her younger brother was with them. I found out they had left her behind. They were kicking up dust on the road and I went to her house in their absence. I remember the dust, watching their progress from the grey dust they kicked. I knew it was safe. Khan Mohammad's men travelled with him. I entered his house and found her on her own. We lay down on a bed to be nearer each other. I remember her face with the sunlight through the shutter. The light looked like a veil. We did not hear her younger brother walk in. We were talking and being near to each other. He yelled and tried to grab a machine gun to kill me. I grabbed hold of the gun and pushed him to one side and escaped. I ran from the house through the village with him chasing after me. He was shouting so that the whole village could hear. The next day Khan Mohammad's men told my father Khan Mohammad had killed her.

All this is the truth but the Man from the Home Office had eyes that refused to believe me. They were strange eyes, stiff and empty. His fingers looked soft holding his pen.

“Why did I enter the house and lie down next to her? I knew the danger so why would I do that?”

He did not believe me. I loved her a lot. There is nothing else I can say. I walked six hours to my uncle's house in Surkh Roud. My father came there and told me the girl had been shot. Khan Mohammad, because he is a commander he has a name in Nangahar, so if his daughter or his son does this kind of thing then he has to kill them. He had left a message with my father

to bring me to the village. The message was holding a gun. He wanted my father to stand with him and shoot his own son. My father spoke to my uncle and left. Khan Mohammad's men came to my uncle's house and fired a few shots in the air. Khan Mohammad had sent his men to all of my relatives. They warned them not to shelter me. My uncle went out and spoke to them. They said they would come back in the morning.

That night I went to Peshawar. My uncle has a house there. It was half a days journey in a vehicle to Peshawar. If I had stayed at his house in Afghanistan his life would also have been in danger. Khan Mohammad had been reported to the police. At the district office they detained him not even for one hour. The people who are powerful can do anything. Khan Mohammad is wealthy, he has relatives and friends in the government. I went to Peshawar and stayed four nights before they found me. They paid gangsters to kill me. I returned to Afghanistan.

Every day they came to my father and warned him. They threatened him if he did not tell them my whereabouts. They told my father the Jarga had met and they had made the decision. I stayed in Surkh Roud. My father went to the Jarga and told them that if Khan Mohammad can find me he can punish me. Khan Mohammad said he will cut me to pieces. I stayed three nights in Surkh Roud then left in secret. My father paid an agent to lead me from the country. I left in secret with him on the fourth night.

I stop remembering. The clothes are in a pile on the floor next to the mattress. If I do not do what I am told they will punish me. It is like I am in jail. The clothes smell of food and of oil

and kebabs. The socks have holes in them. I collect them and go into the next room. Bashir has a bed. The other two sleep on mattresses. The clothes in this room are also in piles and smell of sweat. All three of them work hard, they are builders. Their clothes smell of concrete and brick dust. Zabi had left his mobile phone next to his mattress. There is a magazine next to it. I take the clothes down to the kitchen and sort them. I put the dark clothes into the washing machine and leave the light clothes on the floor. My phone rings, Mohammad is calling me to go to their house.

“I must finish washing their clothes.”

“You only have to clean, you can finish their clothes this afternoon. Come now, before I must leave.’

I put the washing powder back into the cupboard under the sink and put on my jacket. Why are they treating me like this, I think, as if I am not human.

The clouds are not far from the rooftops. All the time it rains here or the clouds look like they should rain. In my village we could tell how the weather would be from the sky. I cannot tell the weather from the sky here. I cannot tell if the clouds are rain clouds or if it will hail or snow. All the time the clouds are grey like the ash from a cow dung fire, and they are close to the rooftops.

The pigeons look like stones someone is throwing over the houses. Mohammad calls me again and shouts down the phone that I am late. The people on the street are watching me and I feel nervous. Sometimes one of them will follow me so I look

over my shoulder. I check no-one is following me or waiting for me behind one of the cars.

The children stop playing football in the street when I pass. They stand and watch me. I wonder why they aren't in school. It still hasn't rained and Mohammad is calling me again.

"I am there now, one minute."

"I have to go now, I'm late. Run and meet me at the door."

I run across the main road and down the side street and arrive at the house. Mohammad is standing in the road looking for me. He raises his hand and calls me a son of a prostitute and then hurries for the bus. I push the door open and walk into the hallway. The house smells of men, of the smell when they don't clean after themselves. I close the door and go into the front room. There are dirty plates on the floor and coke cans and a plate with cigarettes. Ash from this has been tipped on the carpet. The carpet is old and is stained and it smells. The carpets in all the houses I clean are the same. I collect all the plates and empty cans and take them in the kitchen. I collect the plates from the other rooms. Sometimes there are two or three days of dirty plates. They call me when they have run out of clean plates and I come and clean everything. They have spilt food by the bin. Mohammad phones me again and tells me to cook.

The kitchen is small and the gas cooker is old, very old. In the kitchen they have mouse, because the house is very old and they have mouse and other things, black things. The mouse can eat from the plates. There is chicken in the fridge. Someone has spilt milk and not cleaned it up. All the lino is sticky, you can

hear it when you walk. I have tried to clean it many times but the dirt has rubbed into it and it stays dirty yellow.

I cut up the chicken and make chicken biryani. When it is cooked and I am ready to leave Habib comes into the house. Habib is a good man but he is quiet and Mohammad treats him badly. He has taken money from him and insulted him for being late to pay his rent. Habib is quiet and can do nothing. Mohammad is a big man, he has status. No-one can fight with him or he will report them to the Home Office.

I ask Habib if he wants food. He was beaten on the stomach before he came to this country and he says that he takes only a little bit of food because of this. He does not want to eat. He looks sick and goes upstairs. I leave to go back to the other house.

Outside I see a police car at the end of the road. They are talking to a Pakistani man with a beard. I tie my shoelace then go the other way. The clouds have fallen apart a bit, there are gaps in them. I walk past the cash and carry. A Pakistani man owns it and all the workers are Afghan. Not the women on the till, they are Pakistani and the man's family. I go in to see if Khalid is there. He is not so I go back to the house.

“You have washed my clothes?”

“Yes.”

“What have you cooked?”

“Chana. Chicken curry. We need some more rice.”

“You have money for rice.”

“No-one has given me money. There is bread.”

“You cannot keep waking me up every night. I must be at work early.”

“I am sorry.”

“No, you must go. You will wake me up tonight. Every night you scream and wake all of us. I don’t want you in this house any more.”

“But where can I stay? I am not well, I cannot help it if I wake you up. I have too many bad dreams.”

He stands in front of me and pushes me to the door. I try and grab hold of the sofa but he pushes me in my face.

“Go now, get out. You can no longer stay in this house. I will not let you stay in this house.”

“Please, where can I stay? I am not well.”

“I don’t care. You are crazy, mental. You are nothing. No-one will help you, no-one will give you work. You are nothing; useless. We work, we have to make money for ourselves. Go then, get out. You will be deported, the British don’t want you. Not even your own family. Get out!”

He pushes me in the face again and I try to stop him, I try and block myself from the door but he is difficult to fight. He

punches me in the stomach and pushes me out of the door and slams it in my face.

It is dark and the door is shut and I can hear him shouting at the others in the house. I can feel the shadows around me. There is no-one else on the street. I do not know what time it is. Maybe it is twelve o'clock. I cross the main road and walk to one of the other houses and check my phone for the time. It is one o'clock and he had only just come back. I knock on the door of one of the other houses and Ajmal answers. He tells me that he cannot let me in. Firouz has called and told them not to let me in. If they do there will be trouble for them. Ajmal is a good man but he cannot help me. I try to talk to him but he shuts the door in my face.

I go to the house on the next street. They do not even open the door. They shout through the door at me to go away. I knock louder but they shout at me again and then no-one answers. I keep banging the door until my fist hurts but no-one will open it. I can see the people in the house next door looking out of their window. I feel ashamed and I don't know what to do. I walk to the last house and they tell me to go away. I walk back past the mosque and then walk to the park. It is a cold night but I cannot think of anywhere else to go.

The park is the one where the pigeons all go. I have seen people feeding them, throwing handfuls of bread. The pigeons smell when there are too many of them. I sit on a bench and look at my phone. It is 1.07.

I feel too cold to stay sitting. I decide to call Jennifer but it is not the right time. The bench feels damp so I get up and walk around the streets. There are one or two cars but no-one is around. I can hear one of the street lights buzzing when I walk again past the mosque. I walk down the road maybe one mile and walk back. All the time I watch out for the police. I am always scared of the police. Everyone is scared of the police. I try to make it look like I am going somewhere in case they drive past. I have only the clothes I am wearing and my phone and nothing else. No-one cares what happens, if I die or if the police take me and send me back to Afghanistan. There is wind blowing sometimes which makes me feel even more cold.

I walk down a side road and then back on the main road and meet a young guy who is drunk. He says to me *Mate, how are you?* and asks me do I have a cigarette. I say no and he staggers away from me. I think he is going to walk out into the road but he comes back from the edge of the pavement. I get back to the park. It is three o'clock and cloudy and starting to get light. I think about calling Jennifer but I sit and watch the sky and feel my emptiness. When I get too cold I walk through the streets again. A cat follows me. I run away from it when it follows me too far. I think it is the same cat that has torn open bin bags that are dumped in the street. They smell of rotten chicken. I shiver and keep checking the time. It is coldest at five o'clock. I cannot stop myself from shivering anymore so I phone Jennifer.

"Hello."

"Hi, Jennifer. It's Jawid".

"Oh, Jawid, what's up? What's the matter?"

“I am on the streets. I was pushed out of the house because I wake them up at night.”

I tell her my story and tell her I have been on the streets for four hours and I am too cold so please help me. She tells me OK, wait twenty or thirty minutes and she will come. So I wait and she picks me up outside Cheetham Hill Church.

“Jawid, come on, put this on you. Look how cold you are. I’ll keep the heating on.”

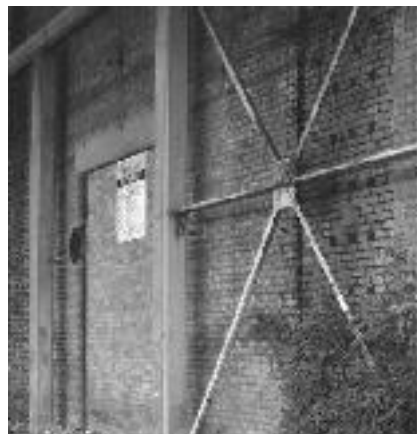
She gives me her jacket to wear and turns the heat in the car towards me. I tell her what happened and I am alone. Then I cry. My father is dead, they have killed him. I don’t know what has happened to the rest of my family. Khan Mohammed is a man who has a name and wants to be honoured with blood. I have no-one here in this country, no-one who can care for me. I have heard English people say they feel alone. It is different I think to be alone in your own country. Jennifer listens and I try no longer to cry.

We talk until nine o’clock when the offices open. She phones social services and the Red Cross and Boaz church. Social services say I am lying. She speaks to the manager and he says I am lying, they have seen me before and I was staying with friends. He doesn’t believe I was thrown out. Boaz church can put me on their waiting list, but it is a long list. She argues with the Red Cross and keeps phoning back until they say they can help me for one night. She tells her work what has happened but they tell her there is nothing they can do.

“I’ve been trying to phone Matthew, Jawid, but he’s not at work today and his phone is switched off. I don’t know if he can do anything but I’ll keep trying.”

“Okay.”

That is all I can think of to say. I have met Matthew I think once. He talked to me in a meeting when everyone else talked to the interpreter. We go to the Red Cross and they give me a hotel room for one night.



Loretta

I am called Loretta, I have been a destitute since 2007. As a failed asylum seeker I was made destitute. The Home Office couldn't have any proof of my nationality to send me back, as such all my support was stopped. I have been living with my friends all this period since then.

What I go through as a destitute and a woman in particular is more than I can explain. I depend on food parcels from the Red Cross, and gifts from friends. .It is not an easy way of life. Sometimes the people I come across are sympathetic with me but others take advantage of my situation, and some ask me to do some services to them. I have been babysitting children for many people only to have a roof over my head. At one time I found myself stranded at the Victoria Station because the person with whom I was staying was no longer willing to help me, saying she is risking her own accommodation because she was NASS supported.

Sometime you just don't even know where you are going to spend the night. At one moment I was forced to pretend to be in love with a man because he wanted to accommodate me in exchange for sexual favours. At present I am still destitute and hoping to renew my asylum claim. I have been beaten several times by a man because he knows I am helpless and couldn't raise my voice because I need shelter, food, and the basic necessities of life from him.

I have never had a steady home. Sometimes I live with people for weeks and I go to bed only when the owner of the house is ready to go to bed also. I have gone without having a shower

or bath on several occasions. There are just so many nasty things one is exposed to when you are a destitute; you don't have shower or basic hygiene, you are forced to go to bed with a man you don't know despite the numerous sexually transmitted diseases. Also spending nights in the train stations and call boxes with the increase in knife crime. In fact there is no safety, your life is at a high risk.

I pray and hope that one day life will return to normal, so that I will be able to have a place called home and I will be able to put on a smile on my face like everybody else.

Lawson

My name is “Lawson”, I came from Uganda to UK in 2006 and declared asylum. I was on section 95 support but after a year my support was stopped and a letter was sent to me advising me to return voluntarily. I was evicted from the accommodation so I went on the streets seeking for help here and there. Even without support I am expected to report at the reporting centre weekly. I tried to negotiate with my case owner, so that the reporting can be reduced to monthly because I don't have money for bus pass every week, but to no avail. I live with a friend four miles away from the reporting centre, so I have to get up early and start making my way to the reporting centre. I have friends who live in London who can offer better help to me, but I can't move to London because I must comply with the reporting schedule.

I made my situation known to my church minister and sometimes he buys me bus pass and also some members of the church try to give me a bit of support. I also get clothes from church members. Sometimes I go to Mustard Tree, which is a charity, for clothing, especially warm clothing's for winter.

I don't have private life or love life because I have nothing to offer and all the time I am stressed and worried about the future. I don't dress well, I don't feed well, I live like a pauper. The British government is very inhuman, allowing destitution in a so-called civilised society, where people prefer animals to human beings.

Daisy's story

The image of when I first landed in the UK still lingers in my mind. I remember it was dark and to make matters worse it was winter, so I didn't have any glimpse of what it looked like other than the beautiful lights that seemed to be surrounding the whole city. I didn't know my journey to an adventurous life was just beginning.

Every Sunday I go to church. There are always these two ladies sat at the back and all they do is talk throughout the whole service. I always ask myself what's that special thing that they couldn't wait to talk after church but have to talk about it whilst in church. At first when they did it I thought it was a one off thing but to my surprise they did it the following Sunday as well. It's very hard to concentrate on what's being preached when you have these two people behind you who can't stop gossiping. They weren't even bothered when people turned around and told them to be quiet. If you did that back home you'd be told off and the next time you do it they would send you out of church. If it's church its church time and the rest will come later.

Going to church back home means a lot for the people and for them Sunday is like a special day where they get to eat nice meals like meat or rice. I say this because they'll probably be eating the same thing all week, for example beans, vegetables, millet and cassava. I remember every Sunday I was always looking forward to drinking porridge with sugar in it because we never drank sugar during the week. Sunday for us was a

relaxing day, meaning there was no digging or any manual work and the sermon was as long as it needed to be. In contrast time rules in this country, even when you go to church. Everything is rushed through just because they don't want to make people stay for long.

Then the journey home from church. I used to love this back home because we used to stop for something to eat. This is due to the fact that the distance from where I lived to church was about 3km. What made it long was climbing the hills and valleys, so we used to carry with us some food and drinks and enjoy the land we passed through. Here the journey from my house to church is just five minutes and the things you observe are just houses and other constructions. Back home we would walk through trees and bushes and rivers that we had to cross to get where we wanted to go. And we had to be aware of our surroundings in case of wild dogs, cats and hyenas. For this reason we had to make sure we walked in groups.

As a matter of fact leaving church and walking home will always be different here compared to back home. Here it doesn't change, what you saw last time is the same thing that you're likely to see again. Back home it's all nature and it's not every day that you will see the same thing or take the same route. Looking at the houses again I am reminded that the first thing I noticed when I arrived here was that the houses all looked the same, the shape of the houses and the way they seemed to be next to each other was strange for me. Another thing was streets. We don't have streets back home and yet still find our way about. It's the other way round here, once you don't know the street then you definitely get lost. It's a little bit the same with the people.

Back home if you meet someone you know you stop to greet them and have a chat and some people even find a place to sit so that they can talk properly. Here sometimes you meet someone you know they will pretend as if they've never seen you before. I guess that's the culture, however sometimes you meet people who are chatty even though they don't know you and I think that's nice. Its almost as if everyone is scared of each other. There are so many languages here and many people speak more than two languages, but thankfully there is one language, 'English', which unites us. Back home almost every district has got its own language but somehow you can understand, though not with every language due to the pronunciation.

At first I thought I was going to be dumb because I could hardly understand what people were saying. The way people expressed themselves and explained things was quite different from back home. I solved this problem by reading lots of books and novels. To be honest I thought that the Manchester accent was funny; every time someone spoke I was thinking to myself why on earth they are like that. Not only that but I also realised that people picked on how people not from Manchester speak and before you know it they are asking you where you are coming from just because your accent is different. I used to hate it when someone asked me this. I think it doesn't matter where you're from as long people understand you. In my opinion English language is just like any other first language and like any language can be used in different ways.

One thing that struck me when I arrived here was when someone spoke and used the word 'was' instead of 'were'. So I decided to ask my ESOL teacher at college why these two words were being used in this way. I was surprised when she

told me that the people speaking like this were wrong. Until then I thought it was me mixing things up, since I didn't understand that English people used their words in that way. It was good of me finding out because I would probably be saying the same thing thinking it was right.

If you meet someone the only thing they will be interested in is knowing what it is that you're doing and lots of other personal questions that can make you feel uncomfortable. It can never be a normal conversation and it feels like everyone has to know what someone else is up to. I am sure there are many things to talk about other than being nosy about someone's life. That's one of the things that makes it difficult to trust people here, along with the fact that everyone seems to be living a double life. It's kind of scary and I think that's why people keep to themselves and don't talk to other people. It's very rare to find someone who is genuine. The good thing about back home is that you grow up knowing people around you and it always feels like a big family and trusting people you've grown up with can never be a problem. Back home there is always a listening ear and people are free to talk to each other. Here everyone is filled up with their own emotions and no-one is even interested in listening to your problems. That's why people get easily irritated about little things due to the emotions that are being bottled up within them.

Having come in winter season I was gob smacked the way everyone was dressed in Black. It was more like a uniform. I decided to ask my mum why everyone was dressed in black and she had to explain to me how it keeps them warm due to the heat it retains. Another thing was that people smiled a lot and I used to think to myself why is it that everyone is smiling at me. That was one of the things that I needed to consult from my

mum and the answer was, its one way of being polite or friendly.

People here have typical days, waking up, having breakfast, go to work, have lunch, come home from work, have tea, watch TV and then dinner. The same thing almost every week which makes it look like something which is already planned out. Back home we don't do typical days, every day has its own agenda. For example we rarely had breakfast. If there was something to eat that morning we would have it but if not then that's it, we'll have to wait for lunch, unless we laid our hands on fruit whilst in the fields.

Every time we used to come from the fields we got home tired but had to push ourselves and do the chores that were left undone. So when we got home we divided the chores amongst ourselves like one of us would wash last night's dishes, the other go into the garden to get vegetables, fetch water from the river and then prepare lunch. Everyday we used to fetch water. After lunch we used to rest for thirty minutes and then continue fetching water. We had a big drum and saucepans that we had to fill in order to take us on through the night and the next morning, so basically we had to make sure we filled everything. Once that was finished then came preparing dinner. The only proper rest we had was bedtime at night.

Now, like everybody else here, when I get home from outside or college, I have a cup of tea and watch TV. Watching TV helps to learn things and see news. However, sometimes when I watch the news , and see all these wars going around it brings back all the memories. I always sit there thinking I was once someone who faced war.

Writing this brings back all the memories of when the war broke out. I remember by that time I was living with my aunt far away from home, in fact it was in another district. Unfortunately she was living near the border of Congo and where we lived there was a Police Barracks. So at anytime there was definitely a chance of the rebels attacking, but when something hasn't happened you don't even want to think about it. The district that my aunt lived in had lots of mountains and that's where the rebels used to hide. So one day we were sleeping at night thinking we are going to wake up like normal and go to school. It was in the middle of the night when we heard gunshots from a distance and the sound of it started coming closer to where we lived. We all woke and started tiptoeing around the house and decided to go in one room. We stayed in that room till morning; we were still scared to even leave that room until 10:00am when we had a knock at the door. At first we thought this is it; I mean what worst thing that could happen to us if it was rebel soldiers who were the ones at the door. Thankfully it was a neighbour checking on us to make sure we were fine. It was then that we left the room. That day we didn't go to school because it was closed due to what had happened that night. Everyone in that area was shocked, scared and terrified at what had happened. Having lived near the barracks we were then advised by the police to stay indoors and not to panic as they had everything control.

The following night the same thing happened only this time it was worse. This time gunshots were being fired right in front of our house. It was the scariest night I have ever experienced. When it got worse we decided to hide under the bed in case they broke into the house. All I did was to pray that it becomes morning. That morning we woke up and found everything outside the house smashed into pieces. There was nowhere to

escape to so we had to stay. That day we made sure everything was done by five pm and then we all went inside the house. Some people were too scared to stay in there houses and so they decided to spend nights hiding in the bush and then days at home. Days and weeks passed by with us being surrounded by rebels and still no escape. After several weeks of living in fear it all stopped and everything seemed to go back to normal for a while. Schools reopened again and I remember the day we went to school most of the windows were smashed and the whole compound was full of bullet shells. Though the war had stopped for a while all schools were being patrolled by police to ensure the safety of the children. The way the war had started anything could happen at anytime. Obviously school wasn't normal we used to finish very early so that everyone got home safe.

After getting used to living in peace for some time we decided to go back to our normal routine of waking up at 5:30am. Though school was near where we lived we still woke up early to prepare ourselves, have breakfast and do some revision before going to school. One early morning we went outside in the kitchen and while we were there preparing breakfast we heard some noise and people whispering and we were like maybe it's just the police patrolling the area and trying to keep peace. Next thing we knew footsteps were coming closer and then we started to panic and rushed inside the house, closed the door behind us and switched off all the lights. After fifteen minutes of standing still in darkness we heard gunshots and rushed to hide under the bed which had become our safety place. Every time I remember that day I think just imagine if we hadn't rescued ourselves earlier thinking it was the police patrolling, what would have happened? God is the only one

who protected us throughout. At this point my aunt decided we should leave that place until the war is over.

My faith keeps me strong and my belief keeps me going. I believe that everyone has got their own destiny, however you cannot just wait. I want to get on with my life but I am cautious of people. What attracted me to people who are my friends is that they accepted me for who I was and the way I was because of the life I am forced to live, not being able to do things like they're doing. For example working, going to university and many other things I can't do because of my status. I was lucky to have found friends whom I can get along with, especially as getting friends is not easy if you're not prepared to be shopping every weekend and getting the latest gadgets. I also realised that people here treasure friends more than their family members. That's something I still ponder on up to now. However in my opinion I think friends seem to appreciate and listen to them more than their families. I think that's why friends come first in this country. People in this country would do anything for their friends, more than they would do for their family. Whereas back home its all about families, though friends matter but not as they do here.

It's very hard as a young person not being able to do what you really want to do. One day I had this conversation with my friend and she was talking about finding a job for me and she was like:

Friend Daisy, at my work place they've got vacancies, do you want me to get an application form for you?

Me Not at the moment, but thanks anyway.
Friend Why? Don't you want to work?
Me I'm too busy with my course and I really want to focus on it. I just don't want something too demanding and destructive at the moment.
Friend I've got lots of coursework to do as well but I'm working. Come on Daisy, its good, and you get to earn something for yourself. Anyway think about it and let me know if you change your mind.

After having this conversation I felt angry because deep down I knew I wasn't able to do what she was suggesting. I also thought this is someone who is trying to help me find a job that I can't even do. It's always one excuse after another that you give to people when they bring up such conversations, though obviously it's not every day that you have to explain yourself to someone when they ask you why you're not working. For some people it's not easy having to talk about their circumstances either. I thought that maybe she thinks that I don't want to work or can't be bothered, but one way or another you have to be prepared to deal with whatever comes your way.

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;
For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;*

My cup runs over.

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

I think of this when I think of the future. The difficult thing right now is that I can't plan anything. The British government describes itself as democratic and for all the years that I've spent here so far I have not seen any democracy at all. Especially when you're in my situation you get to see how bad things really are. They say experience is the best teacher and I think the experience I am having now is one that I will live with all my life. I feel that I and people like me have been treated like we are worthless and don't deserve to be living. Everybody on this planet deserves to be happy regardless of skin colour or who they are. I don't see where it's written that British people are the only ones that deserve to be happy. I say this because that's how it feels like, they see other people as species from another planet not knowing that as time goes by we will have to accept each other. I and my mother have to rely on the goodwill and charity of our congregation in order to survive and all the time we have the threat of being forced out onto the streets. To me it seems that there's no mercy in this country, human beings are being stripped of their dignity for the 'crime' of trying to stay alive or the 'crime' of just being here. No one deserves to be treated like that. I and my mum have been to court several times and it's been a hell of an experience for us. There's nothing so heartbreaking and painful to live your life in fear of not knowing what will happen to you tomorrow or how your life is going to turn out when you get that negative decision from the Home Office. When the British people go to live or stay in other countries the way they are treated is totally different from the way they treat people who come to seek asylum here. That's one issue the Government

needs to consider. My whole experience of being in the immigration system has left me angry and frustrated, the way they treat people it's very inhuman. To me it feels like the "United Kingdom" doesn't apply here at all. This struggle just to survive, the psychological torture of the mind that we have to endure. Life is a God given gift and we don't buy it in shops, so it is precious.

I notice this difference in the way I understand life in everyday things, like in the supermarket. Food here is packed and not fresh. Back home all we had to do was go in the garden and find all this variety of organic foods to select from. Not that here they don't have lots of varieties, they do, but then sometimes you go in the supermarket all you do is shop the same thing that you shopped last week. The first time I went to the supermarket everything seemed to be so perfect, everything had this artificial colour, especially fruits. It looked as though they'd been painted. And people here don't notice how much pollution there is or appreciate the night. The air is always stuffy and I've always wondered why you never see stars in the sky. I miss the view back home of looking up and all you can see is stars and the moon. Back in Africa we used to sit outside at night and count the big and small stars, it used to be fun. Unfortunately here you don't get to do these things. There's always a sense of lack of freedom here even to those people who are natives. If there's one thing that still confuses me is how everything seems to be perfect hence making the people perfect too. This is something that I am fighting not to adopt because I am not used to being perfect. I think if I tried to be perfect it would make me a completely different person. I am saying this because back in Africa everyone is free to express themselves and speak their mind which is something that many people struggle with here. I have realised this especially when having

a conversation with an English person, they are always afraid to say what they think so as not to hurt people's feelings.

Even though my life is difficult I try to see the humour to help me carry on, like in the lifestyle here compared to that of back home. The fact that people don't own anything other than luxuries, back home people have got land, cattle, goats, etc which is something natural and will keep on multiplying for them. Or if someone builds their own home that is something that they've done for themselves. Here people own things that last only a short time. This makes it hard to find someone who will tell you that they are happy regardless of everything they've got and the opportunities they have. That is sad and funny at the same time, like when you see people trying to grow vegetables on such a small piece of land which is their back garden. That said, in general the UK isn't a bad place. I credit it for the tolerance of having people from all corners of the world and I am also grateful for the few things that I have been able to do. Many back home are languishing on the streets due to lack of employment, at least here I am able to study at college, though not University, and do voluntary work.



Rita

I am from Congo, my name is Rita, I have been made destitute. Especially as a woman this is not good to experience. Right now I am living with my boyfriend, who does not have much to offer. He lives in a small room. Every time the house owner calls around she is always threatening to throw us out of the house. I don't do ironing or switch on lights or even have regular bath because the house owner keeps on complaining about high bills, and that the room is meant for one person.

I cry everyday because of what I am going through. I don't have the key of the house. As such I go out when my boyfriend is going out and call around when I know he must have come back home. I have no privacy with my boyfriend because at anytime the owner of the house can just pop into our room and start warning and complaining about the fact she is doing us too much good by keeping us in her house. The whole issue of being a destitute has no positive side. You live at the mercy of others and people take advantage of your situation. Right now I am about putting in a fresh asylum claim so that I can apply for section four support, because I cannot return home as my country is still not safe.

Kenere

I am Kenere from Eritrea. I have been living destitution life for five years. The government can't have travel document for me to be returned home but my support has been stopped. I was at one moment tempted to look for job, but I have no papers. The only job I could do was to do voluntary. Since then I have been doing voluntary jobs with different organisations.

I have no money or accommodation. Before I live with friends who are themselves asylum seekers thereby risking their own accommodation because they are not allowed to admit anybody in. I live like a thief, always watchful if the accommodation provider or housing officer comes around. I have no choice but to go out and wait in the bus stop or wander in the locality no matter how serious the winter, until when it is safe to return into the accommodation.

Finally I was given a shared accommodation by Boers Trust. As such I now live on food parcels. I am an African woman at my late thirties, I can't eat what I like, I eat only what the Red Cross can provide. I have no future, I only keep on praying that one day change will come.

To be a destitute

To be a destitute makes you more than a beggar, you become vulnerable and as a man who has to provide for my wife it is not acceptable. In all my life I was always independent looking after myself and never lack anything, but it is now three years that I am living as a destitute asylum seeker without accommodation, no support or any help from any organisation.

Me and my wife are living apart for the past six months. I come from a poor country and am in one of the richest countries in the world, but now I am even worse off than those in my country who live in poverty. I am having problems with my health since I went to prison for not complying with an order to talk with my embassy. I am suffering from multiple illnesses and am confused at the way my life is here compared to how it was before I came here. I was a healthy man with no illnesses or sick problems, now I am attending a hospital every month. I cannot sleep because I do not have a bed of my own, I am sleeping on the floor at a friend's and have no privacy where I can undress myself except in the toilet. I can only go to sleep after everybody in the house has finished watching TV so I cannot go early to bed if I am tired or just feel like relaxing. All this problem has left me disturbed with the way my life style is. I try to live as a normal person but fail and now I am suffering from epilepsy and depression and always feel like committing suicide.

What is life if you live in a rich country where you don't have enough to eat or a good place to sleep or live, you are like someone who doesn't exist. To be a destitute is one of the most cruel happenings in someone's life. To have no value, no

dignity, no respect, no life. If you are born blind, paralysed, deaf or disabled you become a mature burden for society in Africa. This is exactly how I have become in a rich country where food is not a problem. I don't know how long I can handle this situation of mine. Why can't people stand together and help fight for the rights of destitute people here in the UK. Why must someone first kill himself before this nation of Great Britain wakes up and fights for those who don't have a voice to speak for themselves. How long must this continue before justice will be served unto us. Why must a child see the agony that their parents have to face in a land where I and so many like myself have become foreigners. I hope this letter will let someone understand what failed asylum seekers face in their daily life.

I have to report every second week at Dallas Court reporting centre, without any money or bus pass. I am drinking medicine but do not eat properly. I always makes sure that my wife has enough to eat. Put yourself in my shoes and think of all the pain we run from in our own countries and then face even worse in the UK. I hope that someone can understand my hurt, and that I am bruised. I feel betrayed, stuck in a corner where I can't find my way out. Help me understand how will this pain end so that my life can begin.



Steve's story

I know now how many people my story has happened to, here in the UK and in many other countries across the world. For myself, I come from Kenya, brought by an agent whom I paid to help me escape. We all learn from this life.

I used to be a member of Mungiki, a group that helped young, poor and unemployed people. I was impressed by their organisation as they were giving the young unemployed in the city I came from some hope. They engaged in income generating activities, like organising to fetch water for businesses and homes or acting as security. Mungiki members would come to my bar and we would talk. From this I decided to join.

I was a business man then, running two businesses, a bar and a lithographic printing press. Since the businesses were organised in such a way that they could self-run I had time to associate myself with human rights and development organisations and NGOs. This is how I ended up joining Mungiki, their activities at that time offered people self respect. In order to join I went to the regional co-ordinator for my area with some of the members that I knew and told him I had seen the suffering of the young people in our country and wanted to be part of an organisation that was trying to help. In the newspapers they talk about rituals and initiation ceremonies, but for me I was part of the 'right' tribe. I swore an oath and got membership. At that point everyone wanted to join and as far as I knew there was no violence. Mungiki acted together for the benefit of those our politicians had forgotten or no longer cared about.

I will explain our organisation, everything we did was spread by word of mouth. The leaders would make their decision and this would be passed down to the membership informally. In this way it was secretive but stopped interference. For my part, the first six months after I joined my job was to market the group to the other small businesses in my area and to recruit to the organisation. I would go round to all the business people and ask them if they needed jobs doing and would speak to and recruit young people who came to my bar. After this time the area leader went to speak to the national co-ordinator and when he returned he said I should become the youth leader in the city because I was successful at what I was doing. I was happy with this and travelled to other areas to publicise our group and recruit and organise young members. This went well until the leadership began to change.

The first change I noticed was that the leadership started to say that they no longer wanted women to wear trousers. They said it was immoral and not respectful. They wanted all women to wear dresses. Warnings were given by word of mouth that women found wearing trousers would be punished. I didn't like this idea or understand where it came from and thought it had nothing to do with the work we were supposed to be doing. Some women didn't take the warning seriously and kept on wearing trousers, so it was circulated through the networks that all members whenever they saw women wearing trousers had to undress them and beat them with a cane.

At the time I was still working with NGO's on a consultancy basis and had learnt through them issues to do with human rights and women's rights and that the two are the same thing. I witnessed group members beating women in the street and knew that what they were doing was wrong but I didn't speak

out. I even heard about a French woman from an NGO who was stripped naked and flogged. I admit then that I was becoming afraid.

The next thing which happened was an ultimatum given to all women between the ages of 15 and 45 that they should be circumcised. This applied to all women not just Mungiki members. In order to avoid taking part I made excuses that I was busy, but even so I witnessed forced circumcisions taking place. It was at this point that people started leaving Mungiki, from the middle of 2002. They wanted no part in its violence and oppression of women. Once the leadership heard this they let it be known that all those who had left had to come back otherwise they would be punished. When people didn't rejoin they started to find them and behead them. I saw the dead bodies of ex-members, their heads stuck on tree spikes as a warning to others. The group leadership also started engaging itself into politics. They started being hired by politicians to fight their opponents. The young people would be used to do whatever the hiring politicians wanted, including fighting and killing supporters of opponents and even at times killing the politicians themselves. Many of us wished to leave but were afraid and did not know what to do.

While I tried to understand how I could escape I continued with my job. I saw that the young people were not being paid and were suffering but the group leadership wasn't suffering. The business people who had supported the group before now refused to give jobs. At last my wife and I decided that I would go into hiding and so I went far away to a coastal town where I hid at a friends' house. The idea was that I would escape the country and that afterwards my wife and children would join me when it was safe. One month after we had made

this decision my bar was burned down. My wife had refused to tell Mungiki where I was. She sent a message via a friend to inform me. I felt then that the situation was desperate.

A friend of my wife's then told her he knew an agent who could help me to escape, so my wife and the agent came to meet me. He told me he would take me to Europe, to Liverpool, where I could stay with one of his friends until I got on my feet and my family could come and join me. For a fee he would arrange the passports and tickets. The way he described it, it all sounded easy and straightforward. Through my wife I sold my printing business and borrowed money from family and friends in order to pay him. This way I managed to escape.

Whilst travelling to the UK the agent told me I should not talk to anyone. I was to follow exactly what he told me and to act as he directed. This I did but once we had landed and come to a city he disappeared, leaving me wandering the streets without knowledge of anyone and with hardly any money in my pocket. At that time I didn't panic, instead I got busy thinking about where I was and what I was to do if I were to survive. I watched people go about their business, cars zooming by, big buildings, clean streets and traffic lights that worked. By this observation I realised that everything in the UK is organised in a way that it works. I tried looking for something that wasn't right and couldn't find anything. This made me think that my life was destined to similar perfection, but I had no idea where to start.

I looked more closely at the people, who were different from what I was used to. Most were white, but occasionally I would see a black or an Asian person. However the difference between me and them was that they all seemed to know what they were

doing, where they were going, but in my case I didn't. At this point I realised that I was lost and lonely. I felt like I was alone in a desert and that all these people were like the desert sand. Still, I had no other option than to seek help. I looked around for a person whom I could have confidence in, for someone who closely resembled me. I saw an African lady, whom I approached and explained my problems. She advised me to seek asylum at an organisation called Refugee Action. She gave me directions and after a few times getting lost I found my way there. I explained my situation to them, they recorded what I said and gave me a letter to take to a nearby police station.

At that time I felt nervous. I didn't know what to expect at the police station, however I was inclined to believe that the police in the UK behaved better than those in Kenya. But still I was not sure. I had some fear creeping up my spine and my armpits were sweating. Despite this I thought it was better to deal with the police, irrespective of what shall happen, than wander the streets without knowing what to do.

I entered the police station, keen and observant about every detail I came across. This would help me were the police to be violent towards me and I needed to run away. I gave myself courage by getting the feeling that European police treat people better than our African police and that there were human rights here. Then for a moment I remembered how they used to beat and torture Africans during colonial times and I shivered a little. However, there was no turning back.

Upon explaining my situation and handing them the letter from Refugee Action, the police recorded the information. All went well, better than I had expected. They found me accommodation in a bed and breakfast until the following day

when they took me to the Home Office, where my asylum claim was officially documented. From there I was given NASS accommodation.

The accommodation was shared between three of us, one African, one Jamaican and myself. In short it was a crap. The carpet was full of cigarette burns and coffee and tea and blood marks. There were rodents like mice. The beddings were dirty and smelly, with blood stains. The sofas were torn beyond repair. The kitchen was dirty and smelly with leaking pipes. The walls were rough and unpainted. It was cold and the heating wasn't working. Although it was better than nothing it still seemed to me that a part of Africa had been brought here to the UK. I learnt to ignore most of these things and waited, thinking only of my claim.

I was refused by the Home Office towards the end of the year. I was shocked. I took a walk to calm myself down and think about the results, and later came back to go through the refusal in detail. I was depressed, angry, confused. I wondered how someone, somewhere, could not realise this was a straightforward and clear issue. I just couldn't understand the kind of the person who would give this refusal. I appealed to the tribunal but the refusal was repeated. My solicitors were closed down because they had trouble with the government and their licence was removed.

That is when my mind started changing about the asylum system. I found it to be similar to the way weathermen in my country work: instead of going out and researching the weather prospects, they instead toss a coin. Heads, it will rain, tails it will shine.

With the refusal I was given twenty eight days to leave the NASS accommodation, when all support would stop. I tried talking to the accommodation providers and Refugee Action to consider letting me stay until I had organised myself but they refused. They said law is law and I had to get out of the property even if I ended up sleeping rough in the streets. They said if I didn't get out voluntarily they would throw my bag out in the streets and call the police. From that time I was destitute.

It has been hard for me, the time I have been destitute. After being kicked out of the accommodation and my support cancelled, I asked a fellow asylum seeker if he could let me stay with him, although asylum seekers are strictly prohibited from housing someone else. After convincing him, he let me sleep on the floor. From there on I kept hopping from one friend to the other, whoever I knew, for food and somewhere to sleep overnight. At times I was forced to sleep rough in the streets when I missed someone to help me.

Throughout this five years it has been friends and charity organisations that have sustained me, as with other destitute people. Friends offer me accommodation and the institutions offer me food parcels and second hand clothing. I also do any odd job that comes by. It was my decision that I have to support myself as much as possible before seeking help from others. The only way I could do this was through working, though the government has made it illegal for asylum seekers to work. Despite this I compared and contrasted the law on one hand with my human rights on the other. Whatever the law says I have the right as a human to meet my basic human

needs. Therefore my alternatives were to work or to die. I decided that if in order to survive I must break the law then I was going to be breaking the law as long as there was an opportunity to do so.

In working on average I get paid £2 per hour, and often I am cheated and don't get paid at all. This is the average going rate for asylum seekers. I do any kind of work that comes by and earn about £40 per week. I know this can be viewed as exploitation by employers but it is not all their fault that they pay me low wages and neither is it my fault that I work illegally. Rather it is the asylum system that creates this situation.

In terms of work that I do it is normally manual and dirty work. I have done gardening and cleaning and shifting heavy goods in hot weather and rain and winter cold. I have had to clean clothes including soiled and bloodied underwear. I have unblocked toilets without any protection from the stinking excrement. These are jobs only people in my situation would accept. And even when I am ill I must still work and hope that I will heal naturally or use traditional African herbs as I cannot use a GP or go to the hospital without fear that because of the law they will inform the police or the Home Office.

It was just a few months ago when I had trouble with the police. I was going about my business, walking on the road towards a shop in the evening, around seven pm. A police car suddenly pulled up in front of me. I was shocked, not just because of the manner in which the car had stopped but because

of the fact that it was the police. I could not understand what I'd done wrong. They jumped out and shouted at me to stop and raise my hands. One came in front of me watching me and taking down notes as the other one searched me. He was asking me if I had any drugs or weapons, to which I replied no. They found nothing. Instead of leaving me alone and apologising for the interference they asked me how I was in the country and my immigration status. When they didn't get a satisfactory answer they handcuffed me and forced me into the back of the police car, saying I will explain more at the police station. I believe they only did this because of the colour of my skin and my African accent. If I had been Australian they wouldn't have asked me how I was here and what was my status. This made me curse the reason why I was going to the shop, I would still have been safe if I not walked out. However, I thought that when it's over, it's over, just like death. I had to face whatever would happen to me.

On arrival at the police station my details were taken and I was led to a cell. I was told to remove my shoes. The cell was cold and had a narrow bed with a plastic mattress and nothing to cover myself with. An overhead fan made the cold worse. Drilled into the wall was what seemed like a camera and beside it was a bell button. There was graffiti all over the walls, saying who had been there and when, abuses to the police and praises and glorifications of gangs and gangster life. The mattress was cold when I sat on it. I didn't sleep a wink that night, worrying what was going to happen.

In the morning I was given a disposable plastic cup of tea and some biscuits. At lunch I was given something that seemed as if they had scooped some vomit somewhere and served it as food. The taste was disgusting and I couldn't eat it. I consoled

myself by remembering that there are millions in Africa who have nothing to eat for days and they still survive. In the meantime they kept telling me that an immigration official would come and interview me.

I'm not sure how long I waited, it seemed like a decade, before the immigration official finally came to interview me. He was dressed in a fluorescent jacket clearly labelled '*Home Office, Border and Immigration*'. He took me through corridors to an interview office and started asking me questions. He wanted to know what I was still doing in the country when my asylum case had been refused. He was so arrogant with his questioning and I imagined that were we to be in a different place I could easily slap him. He kept making phone calls until eventually he confirmed beyond doubt that I had put in a fresh claim and there was no reason under which he could hold me. I was authorised to be released but they made the condition that I had to report once a week. They returned me to the cell while they completed their paperwork and brought me some vomit supper.

I was glad at my release but I knew the reporting and signing was a risk to me because I had made the fresh claim myself as I couldn't afford a solicitor. Any time at report I could be detained and deported. If out of fear I did not report and sign then I am breaking the law and they can still look for me and detain and deport me. I thought that this reporting thing is similarly draconian to what back home used to be known as 'Chief's Act'. When university students demonstrated and rioted and burnt buildings all students was told to report and sign every week in their respective villages. We demonstrated and lobbied the government to abolish this act because most of the students were not involved in these riots. After a rigorous

campaign our government abolished the act. If a third world country saw sense to abolish this kind of injustice it is a shame that the British government does not see the injustice of treating people like criminals who have committed no crime.

All this has confirmed for me that I cannot give up. In the beginning I was depressed but as time went on I realised that the asylum process is only a design of the government, which can deny me my rights but which could only make me feel inhuman with my consent. I decided that I had better look for ways of surviving and for ways to help myself. So I have taken my life up to now as a challenge, and I will not be defeated by a system that in actual fact has defeated itself.



Destitute for five years

I have been destitute for five years. My support was stopped, and from then I have been changing from friend to friend. I am now babysitting one woman's three kids just to have a roof over my head. I sleep only when the whole house is going to bed, because I sleep in the living room on the sofa. I am a lady at my late forties, yet I don't have a future. I can't return home because I have lost all my family and until this date the people responsible for this are still in power.

I eat bread and snacks most of the time which is not good for my health. I can't cook fresh food because I am not the owner of the house. Still I thank her for housing me because it is not her fault that I am in this situation. Everywhere I go, I have to be conscious of time because I have to pick the children up from school, my reward being a place to sleep and a bus pass to enable me take the bus with the kids.

On the weekend I do ironing and washing of the children's clothes, and if I have to visit a friend, maybe spend the weekend or a week away, I have to let the woman I work for know and check it is convenient for her. If it's not okay with her then I have to stay back home.

I hope and pray that anyone reading this real life story should not just read and forget about it, but try to look for a means where the situation can be changed.

Martha

My name is Martha, I am from Eritrea. I came to UK since 2004. My asylum claim was rejected after six months. After that my support was stopped and I became homeless, living with friends and families in return for domestic services. In fact I was forced to do mean jobs just to survive.

I have been stranded several times on the streets not knowing where to spend the night. In summer it is easy but in winter with the harsh weather, I really can't paint the picture. I have fallen sick several times. Anywhere, in every situation, you will always find different kind of people, those who truly sympathise with you and those who are ready to take advantage of your situation. I receive gifts from many people like their unwanted clothes, food parcels and cash, while from some people they decide to exploit me. Some offer their help for sexual favours. Thank God, after waiting in the queue for long, I was provided accommodation by Boers Trust, and presently live on Red Cross food parcels. This is better than nothing and I live hoping one day the government will give amnesty.



I was 22 years old, I am now 32

I came to UK in 1999 from Afghanistan. By then I was 22 years old. I am now 32.

To flee my country when Taliban came to power, I went from Afghanistan to Teheran in Iran. Many people were leaving then to either Iran or Pakistan. There are about 3 million Afghans in Pakistan, and the figure is higher in Iran. I fled with my family and stayed in Iran for two years.

While I was there my family separated. My sister went to Canada and got married there to an Afghan. Another sister and brother now live in Dubai. My younger brother stayed but later came to UK in 2001.

When I arrived here in UK I applied for asylum. To get here I used lorries and walked for long distances. Then very few Afghans were coming to UK because few knew about this country. Most were going to Germany.

When I left Iran I went to Turkey. Life in Turkey was very tough. I stayed there one month with other Afghans. There was no food or shelter. Circumstances were so bad that we were forced to leave.

Together we walked for twenty days to get to Greece, but when we got there we were detained and deported back to Turkey. Turkey refused to give us asylum and we were forced to leave. We decided to go to UK. By walking and lorries I finally arrived into UK.

When I arrived and applied for asylum I was put in a hotel. This was the best country in terms of the way I was treated. But since I applied for asylum until now I have never been interviewed nor gone to court. I don't know what has happened to my asylum application.

In 2004, I received a letter from Home Office saying that I had been given temporary leave to remain. My support and accommodation was then cancelled but they didn't send me any documents to show I had leave to remain.

After one year in limbo, I asked my solicitor to check with the Home Office what was wrong. After seven months, the Home Office wrote to my solicitor and apologised that they had mixed up my application with somebody else who had a similar surname as mine. But they didn't give any information about my application.

I was given back the NASS accommodation and support but the work permit I had been given due to the mix-up was cancelled.

Whilst getting NASS support, it is possible for me to go to college. But I never go because I can't concentrate in class due to my situation.

At first when I arrived here I was quite happy. I had a good life and had made some Afghan friends. In the first 5 years when I had NASS support everything was fine. I organised and managed an Afghani football team which played with English teams. We were having a good time and people from different places were mixing well. It doesn't happen any more. Now all my friends are gone. Some got status and others were

dispersed. Others got married, and since I am single I do not associate with them because they have moved to a different class. Most Afghanis, once they get leave to remain here, their people back home organise for them someone to get married to. And so they go back home and bring back a wife.

I pass most of my time alone. Sometimes I play football or just go and meet my friends. I feel so bad because of my situation. I have experienced difference since coming here. I have noted different cultures, traditions and ways of life. I don't miss anything in Afghanistan and I wouldn't go there. People in Afghanistan fight and quarrel all the time. But when they come here they change because of laws and regulations.

Most of the time I stay indoors. I am always feeling depressed due to my situation. I feel like I don't have a life. People who have been given stay have got a life. I just hang around waiting for a decision from the Home Office. And even if I get a positive decision now, 10 years down the line, I will have to start life from zero.

My message, especially to my people is, when they get stay, people should learn English, the English cultures and traditions and should live well with the English people. Afghanis who get stay here should integrate and not just deal with their own. And because of just staying with their own, they loose because some stay for so many years here and yet cannot speak a word in English. Again they only work for Pakistanis in factories and takeaways for £2 per hour because they speak Urdu only. And to English people who judge asylum seekers as all bogus, they should change their attitudes.

Back in Afghanistan currently there is just war and fighting all the time. People are unhappy about it. America and Britain can finish that war in a day if they so wished. People grow opium to get money for livelihood. The amount of poppy grown has gone up since the Americans arrived.

Many in my family have been killed because of the fighting. All my family has been separated because of war. Everyone is trying to move out because in Afghanistan, there is no guarantee for life. For example my father fled with us to Iran, and then one day he decided to go and check our home. During the night, our house was hit by a rocket and he was badly injured. He was just lucky to be alive but the whole home was destroyed.

In 2001, my younger brother came to UK and within six months he was granted ILR. I don't see much of him nowadays because he has since got married.

I don't do much in my life here because I can't do anything, I just waste time. There is nothing to do. Sometimes I play football on Friday. If I had a chance I would play daily. The others I live with are in the same situation as me, although one of them is going to college to learn English. Most of the time I withdraw and spend time on my own because I feel like I am worth nothing, like I am not a human being. I don't know how I can get out of my situation. Previously when I had people around me I was fine. Being alone is what depresses me.

I also think that organisations that deal with asylum seekers should not just say that people are welcome here. They should go an extra mile and help in improving the way asylum seekers and refugees live here because many end up being traumatized.

Sofia

My name is Sofia Mweni and I am a destitute asylum seeker. I will tell you what I do to survive in this country. I don't get any help or funding from friends. For the past six months I lived with people who don't know me but they just offer to help me for one week or a few. To be a destitute woman in Britain it is a serious and also major problem. This can lead me into a sex slave because I don't have a roof or any money and the only solution is to go home with any man who offers me shelter. This is what happen to woman who face destitution, our only hope to survive is to do voluntary work so that we can talk and raise awareness to other organisations so that they can help us find accommodation, like Boers Trust and WAST Women Asylum Seekers Together. Or Refugee Action and MRSN Manchester Refugee Support Network. As I am talking now I am still a destitute woman who lives with someone for a few weeks. I just have to hope that the person who I am staying with will help me to stay with her for more than a few weeks, but unfortunately this probably won't be so.

I have to go every second week to Dallas Court the reporting centre, this is by bus or otherwise I must walk to this place. The Home Office don't want to hear from me that I cannot come, because I don't have money to take the bus. For them this is out of the question. If I do not go to report I will end up in detention where I will be without my freedom.

Charles

I am Charles N, from Cameroon. I came to UK since 2003. I am from the southern Cameroon. Due to my political opinion I had problems with the ruling government. I was detained several times before I successfully ran away to seek refuge in the UK. My asylum claim was refused by the home office and the judge saying I have not shown enough proof that I am at risk when returned home. Even my medical report from the Medical Foundation was also ignored by the immigration judge. My support was stopped, I became a destitute and was all the time stressed having no food or money to plan my next plan of action. I could not further my education because I was asked to pay international fee without working.

A few friends contributed money to support me to leave the UK. I tried to make a move to France but I was caught so I am still wandering around without any support. I can't return home because the same government is still in power. I am like a beggar in a society where everyone has to account for your survival. I have a job in a shop, even though I know I am being exploited, yet it is better than nothing. I sleep in the shop when the business is closed because I have nowhere to go or spend the night.

I hope one day there will be a government in the western world, the UK in particular, that will be considerate enough to understand what it means to be an asylum seeker.

Glossary

Indigent	Destitute, lacking even basic necessities.
Destitute	Refused asylum and deprived of all basic necessities. By law not allowed to work.
NASS	National Asylum Support Service. Now UKBA Asylum Support.
UKBA	UK Border Agency. A shadow agency of the Home Office, responsible for border control and enforcing immigration and customs regulations. It also considers applications for permission to enter or stay in the UK, citizenship and asylum.
ILR	Indefinite Leave to Remain. Permission to live in the UK indefinitely without any immigration restrictions.
Section 4 support	Accommodation outside London for people whose asylum claim has been refused and who have exhausted all their appeal rights and who have no other means of support. Provided on the condition that the applicant is 'taking all reasonable steps to leave the UK'.

Section 95 support Accommodation provided while a claim for asylum is being considered. Subsistence living costs in the form of supermarket gift cards also provided.

Refugee United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees

A person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence and has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.

In UK refugee status is granted for five years, after which it will be reviewed

Asylum Seeker A person who has left their country of origin, has applied for recognition as a refugee in another country, and is awaiting a decision on their application.

Reporting Requirement imposed on people whose asylum claim has been refused to sign at a reporting centre. This can be anything from once a month to three times a week.

