



By Matthew Whelan

The wind rose, hissing through the stillness of the African dusk. As a crescent of sun fell beneath the western horizon, blood-red light streaked through the sky like flames, then faded into the black tide of a gathering storm. Anvil-shaped thunderclouds swept low across the eastern horizon, cloaking a crest of hills on the outskirts of Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda. Soon, the storm's immense embankment had blackened the entire sky, except for scattered patches of emerald rain that shimmered against the backdrop of the storm.

Through the single window of the shed, a breeze carried a faint scent of rain. Inside, the darkening light splintered through cracks along the wooden siding. A thin sheet of dust lay everywhere: upon the stained carpentry table with wood shavings scattered across its surface, upon the shipping crates and boxes stacked haphazardly against the wall, and upon the broken lawn mower rusting by the door.

David awoke, disoriented, to a distant clap of thunder. He was a slender boy for fourteen, his eyes a clear, innocent blue. He sat up slowly, letting his vision adjust to the darkness. He felt the dust all over his body, burning his eyes and in the back of his throat. Immediately he realized that his family's impending evacuation was not a dream. The fighting and the hatred were real.

He placed his hands on the ground and shifted away from the shed's corner shadows into the narrow stream of light from the window. With his movements, the dust rose sluggishly, spinning in the fading sunlight. Even though he could see the silhouettes of his parents beneath the carpentry table next to him, David felt alone. The sounds around him faded into silence until all he could hear was the quiet pattern of his own breathing. And with each breath, he felt the dust in the back of his throat, burning.

Just then, his father turned up the volume of the shortwave radio only enough to hear its hushed static crackle above the rising wind of the approaching storm. "Base, this is 237. Do you copy? Over." The static hissed softly. "Repeat, base, this is 237. Do you copy? Over," he whispered again firmly, grasping the radio in his lap. The static continued to hiss into the silence. His dad turned the radio off and forcefully set it down next to him. He sighed with frustration.

"Is anyone at the embassy, James, honey? Can they hear you?" David's



mom asked.

"Everything's under control, Pam. We're gonna be fine. They're evacuating, family by family. That's why they're not answering."

The wind outside had hushed to a gentle breeze. Tree branches scraped softly against the corrugated roof of the shed.

David's mother moved next to David and placed her hands on his shoulders. "Are you OK, honey?" she asked, gently rubbing his back.

"I'm fine," he answered, sounding detached. As he edged away from his mother, he asked, "You think they'll be here soon?"

"Of course they will. But we're safe, honey. We've got our radio right here. Soon we'll be back home in the U.S., and then you can see your cousins. Won't that be great?"

David didn't answer. He looked out the window into the storm. In the pale haze of dusk, the ash-black clouds of the storm massed together, rising like an immense wave on the horizon. Beneath him, dry heat emanated from the floor of the shed. David felt hollow inside as he thought of his friend Moses. He tried desperately to believe that Moses was safe and the fighting had not reached him. But deep within himself, David knew that Moses had been trapped within the hatred.

"It's really stuffy in here," David's dad whispered, shifting his position and overtaking his son's thoughts. "This dust," he mumbled to himself.

Lightning flickered on the horizon; in the distance, a sharp crack of thunder. The wind began to pick up again, rattling the doors to the shed. Over the wind, and beyond the wall of their house, gunfire thundered. David continued to sit alone, while his parents huddled together. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, trying to concentrate on something—anything—besides the thundering of the guns. But he couldn't focus. He could only hear the guns growing louder. Suddenly the gunfire stopped, and the wind faded. There was silence. David could feel his heart pounding violently. He tried to breathe softly, opening his mouth only enough to let the air in and out, as if the silence would protect him.

A pain burned in David's chest; his whole body throbbed. Nausea tunneled into his empty stomach. Grasping his stomach, he leaned forward. He clenched his fists in an attempt at self-control, his body quivering with strain. Gaining control, he breathed softly, whispering to himself, *Moses, please be safe. I didn't know there would be fighting. Moses, please be safe . . .*

David had met Moses on his first day in Rwanda, five years earlier. David's father was a food specialist with a Ph.D. in agricultural economics who was hired by the United States Agency for International Development to combat food insecurity within Rwanda. Even though Moses was a year older than David, both boys looked about the same size. They loved to play soccer together, and found they were similar in many respects, which made their bond a strong one, able to bridge their separate worlds.

Tamara, Moses's mother, was the housekeeper for David's family. She lived with her husband and Moses on the outskirts of Kigali in a one-room, ruddy, mud-brick shack, two miles west of David's house. Since his house had no flooring, Moses slept in the red dust on scraps of used cardboard boxes until David's family arrived. Moses's life had improved with the acquisition of basic items such as blankets, secondhand clothing, and books, which David's parents saw that Tamara received, in addition to a pay increase. Each day, Tamara would begin working, and the two boys would play soccer outside. When it was time for school, Moses would walk a mile and a half east to Leopard's Hill Secondary School while David's mom drove David to the American Embassy School that all the diplomats' children attended.

As American diplomats, David's family lived within a towering white brick wall topped with razor wire and joined by a shining black metal gate. A double set of bars shackled all the windows, and the bedrooms were hidden behind a metal grill and a padlocked door. Inside the wall, flowers, fruit trees, and gardens thrived. Outside the gate, crusted brown grass writhed in the scorching heat. David knew that the gate, the walls, and the razor wire had not been built merely to protect his family. They were there to isolate them—to keep that world, Moses's world, on the outside,

*Lightning flickered on the horizon; in the distance, a sharp crack of thunder. The wind began to pick up again, rattling the doors to the shed.*

where everything was scorched like the grass. The commissary at the embassy was stocked with imported food, and only Americans were allowed to shop there. This puzzled Moses, who once remarked to David,

"You are not living in America. You are here." But David's family passively accepted the embassy's attempt to do what was considered best for their safety. For they had known, even before moving to Rwanda, that it was a dangerous post, and ever since independence there had been a history of tension between the Hutus and Tutsis, the two main ethnic groups within Rwanda.

Most days after school, Moses took David outside the wall around David's house. The two boys walked to the open-air markets of downtown Kigali, bought slingshots, and sold the bracelets they had made from the tops of soda cans. And almost every day they played soccer barefoot, using bricks as goals, on the dirt field down the street.

At the end of the hot and dry season, the field became a blanket of dust that, as they played, rose around them in a haze. The scattered patches of grass usually died by mid-November, and it was around that time, before the rains, that the sun stained the dust a

deep red. With the rains came renewal of life for the plants languishing in the dust, crusting beneath the scorching sun. All vegetation, not just the greenery inside diplomatic enclaves, became green and lush if the rains were good. The fate of the maize crop depended on rain. The hope that Moses's world could feed itself for another year depended on the green rain that settled the dust and cooled the air.



The boys had been kicking the soccer ball on the field when David experienced his first African rain. Moses was bare-chested, and David had on a faded tan T-shirt. Dark clouds, pregnant with rain, blackened the sky in the west. The storm swept eastward, surging like a flood. Soon, rain dropped in sweeping sheets across the field, packing the dust. It came down so hard that David couldn't even see Moses a few feet away from him. Moses had blended into the streaming green, as though he had become part of it. The wind abruptly died down, the walls of rain dissolving. Rivulets flowed and then soaked into the dust. Bright yellow light haloed Moses's silhouette as he spun in a circle, arms outstretched like a plane. Then he lay down and started making an angel in the mud, like David used to make when his world snowed. Moses laughed and looked to the sky. The rain streamed down his cheeks, beading on his shimmering skin. After the rains subsided, Moses lay silently in his bed of earth, and David stood laughing, arms outstretched above him.

The rains had not yet come when the embassy school let out for Christmas vacation. During the vacation, David had lots of time to play soccer with Moses. But on the following Tuesday, David's family had to pack for their holiday trip to the United States. That day, David's mom made him clean and organize his room before he could play. He was packing when he looked out the barred window and saw Moses standing barefoot at the gate, smiling. David walked out to greet him. As David approached, he could see that Moses's entire body was coated with dust.

David told Moses that he had to clean his room and pack his bags because he was leaving the next day to go on vacation. The two boys stood facing each other, separated by the black gate. Moses extended his arm between two of the bars and placed it on David's shoulder. "Hey, bring me some soccer shorts from the States." He then smiled his beautiful smile, white teeth glistening in the light. He asked, "Is it really cold in the States this time of year?"

"Oh yeah. It's freezing. Up in New England where

## Calypso

Sometimes  
as the liquid gold of dawn  
kisses the wave tips  
and caresses the glowing shore,  
she opens her eyes to the flush of glory  
and has a moment of pure delight.  
Then the veil  
of sleep's gift of forgetfulness lifts  
and she remembers that he is gone.  
Then the winking of the waves  
and the cool fingers of the wind  
seem to mock her, whispering,  
"Even with all of this he left you,"  
and the beauty of the golden island  
is just a reflection of her own hollow beauty,  
which in all its immortal glory  
was not enough to make him stay,  
and every space of air on the island  
she knows now to be empty  
because he had once filled it.  
If you ask her  
she can still show you the exact point on the  
horizon  
where the speck of his raft vanished  
into the gray film of cloud.

—Jessica Stites,  
*Ninth grade, E.O. Smith High School,  
Storrs, Connecticut*

[Another poem by Jessica Stites appears on page 71.]



we're going, there's snow everywhere."

"I've never seen snow. Maybe someday you can take me to the States for a visit. But we'll talk when you get back. Take care, my friend." Then Moses bounced his worn ball, turned, and ran down the street. As he ran, his image twisted and curled in the heat waves that radiated from the pavement.

David finished packing sooner than he thought he would and, seeing that he had plenty of free time, went to tell his parents he was going to find Moses. David was entering his parents' bedroom when he heard the receiver of the phone crash against his mom's nightstand. She slowly walked over, grabbed his arm, and dug in her fingernails, a sharp contrast to her normally calm demeanor. Cupping his face with her other hand, she told him to collect, as quickly as possible, anything he wanted to keep and put it in his duffel bag.

Sinking upon her bed, she held her stomach with one hand and her forehead with the other. "Honey, that was Mr. Berry, the security officer from the embassy. President Habyarimana's plane crashed. Apparently, the Hutus have blamed the Tutsi rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front for the death. Mr. Berry said that within minutes of the crash, soldiers of the Presidential Guard took to the streets. There's been fighting, David." She paused. "And armed men have been reported breaking into people's houses." She went on to explain that because theirs was one of the few embassy homes that had a shed in the back of the property, they had been instructed to go into the shed and hide. No one would even think of looking for them there. Once there, she continued, they would wait until Roving Patrol, the embassy's security detachment, could safely transport them to the northern border. When they were out of Rwanda, they would be flown home. She held David tightly in her arms, softly whispering, "We're being evacuated."

David pleaded, "But Moses—he asked me to go and play soccer with him. He's still outside! I've got to find him."

Again taking his face in her hands, David's mother looked into his eyes and said firmly, "We don't have a choice, honey. It's too dangerous to go anywhere. We have to stay put. All we can do now is pray for Moses."

"What do you mean *pray* for him?" David screamed. "He's there, outside! He's in it!" David's heart hammered and his breathing quickened as he

thought of Moses, unaware, making his way down the street. He slammed the door behind him and ran down the hallway to his room. Dizzy and disoriented, he fell face-first onto his bed. He could feel his heart throbbing against the sheets.

Beyond the shed and the wall of the house, gunfire had once again erupted in spasms. Night had fallen silent over Kigali. In the distance, David could hear the faint rumblings of thunder as he sat alone in the corner of the shed. The storm was still fixed in the distance, just above the horizon. It was cooler now that the sun had set. It no longer smelled like dust inside the shed. The air smelled moist and fresh—as it always does before the rains. A red haze softly illuminated the skyline, highlighting the undulations of the storm clouds.

"James?" David's mom whispered, pointing out the window. "Why is the sky glowing red?"

"There's a fire. That's definitely a fire. They're burning the trees outside of town."

"Why would they do that?" she asked.

"I don't know. That's what the farmers do before the rainy season. The ash acts like fertilizer. But I don't know why they're doing it now. There aren't going to be crops this year," he added solemnly.

David could see his father's frustration. He knew that his father had earned two master's degrees and a

*They had known that it was a dangerous post, and ever since independence there had been tension between the Hutus and Tutsis, the two main ethnic groups within Rwanda.*

Ph.D. in an attempt to gain enough knowledge and skills to help hungry people. David remembered his father's optimism when they first arrived in Rwanda; it seemed so long ago. But over the years, that optimism had slowly faded. His father spoke often about governmental bureaucracy and corruption—how the Rwandan government itself was an impediment to achieving food security. And now, with the outbreak of fighting, David knew the foundation his dad had worked five years to build was being swept away by a flood of hatred.

Just then, they heard footsteps on the gravel outside the gate, then the creak of the gate opening.



David's father said, "It must be Tamara. She's the only one with a key to the lock." He stood, walked quickly to the door of the shed, and slipped outside.

When the door opened again, David saw the figure of Tamara. The dim light from outside illuminated her face. Her eyes looked different, frozen in an expression of silent horror. Her hands were wrapped around her body. David's father helped her maneuver past the lawn equipment and boxes, toward the back of the shed where his mother was. His mom cleared a

*At the end of the hot and dry season, the field became a blanket of dust that, as they played, rose around them in a haze.*

space for her in the corner. Tamara crouched in the shadows, her knees pressed against her chest. David's mother gently touched Tamara's shoulder and asked, "Tamara, are you OK?"

Tamara spoke softly, her voice broken by sobs. "We were in our homes . . . the Hutus . . . they came for us there. In our homes!" There was a long pause as she wept. David could see the fear in his parents' eyes. Tamara then continued, "I escaped into the trees and waited until darkness. I watched the killing from the trees. The evil ones—there is red in their eyes. They are not human. That hatred is not human. When everyone lay silent, they left. It was then that I saw him—my husband. His face . . ." she strained, "it was not there . . . and Moses . . . he never came back." Her body slumped to the ground. She broke down, sobbing, "My Moses . . . my Moses . . ."

David leaned forward and looked out the window. He was numb as he thought about the five years he had spent in Rwanda and of the horror outside, a horror Tamara had seen with her own eyes. All he could think, all he could feel, was the question, *Where does this kind of hatred come from? Just days ago I was playing soccer in the streets with Moses.* In the red haze of the burning trees, David could see the storm, towering like an immense black wave on the horizon. He took a deep breath. *Heavy rain should fall soon,* he thought, feeling the dust burn in his eyes.

It was then that he remembered what Moses had told him about the hatred. David remembered that night well; never before had he felt so distant from Moses. They were eating dinner at Moses's house, outside on woven reed mats. Tamara had prepared the meal in two charred pots over an open fire. The

flames danced, flickering on Moses's face as he spoke. "Our history has been passed down through generations, by my father and his father's fathers before him. The elders tell stories of peace long ago, before colonialism. There was no hatred then—that came only with the Belgians. They made differences where there had been none before. They said, 'A Hutu is different from a Tutsi.' Now Hutus say we were favored under Belgian rule. They say we received the best jobs and the best schooling. So when they gained power after independence, they made all Rwandans carry identity cards. They spoke of herding Tutsis into separate regions of the country. But you are a *mzungu*—an outsider. You can never understand these things. We once fought. And ever since the guns fell silent, only hatred has remained. But your eyes are innocent, unable to see it." He paused, gazing into the fire. "It still remains."

A sharp crack of thunder interrupted David's thoughts. He could hear Tamara weeping in agonizing gasps. A cool breeze entered through the window. Slowly, Tamara quieted. From the blackness of the corner she spoke, as if to herself, "It smells of rain. Wash it away . . . Come and wash this away."

David could feel his eyes brim with tears as he watched Tamara, and, unable to hold them back, he wept quietly into his dusty hands.

Outside, gunfire spat above a fading rumble of thunder. A flash of lightning lit up the horizon. After a long silence, thunder sounded. The gunfire intensified, thundering louder than the storm. Everyone in the shed sat up, startled by the proximity of the guns. David's dad turned up the volume on the radio to block out the sounds of the shots. They listened to the static crackle loudly for a long while.

Then, over the static, they heard the familiar voice of Mr. Allen, an American diplomat, who lived on the next street over. His voice was strained and high-pitched. He was screaming. "They're here! I can hear them! Where the hell are—" David's dad turned the radio off quickly. There were distant screams. Machine-gun fire thundered. It stopped. The gunfire started again in rapid spasms. The screaming stopped abruptly, and there was silence.

David's dad whispered, "They're coming." David moved next to his parents and held his mother's hand. Everyone huddled together beneath the stained carpentry table. David could hear his mother's crying and Tamara's ragged breathing. He felt his father's cold grip.

A warm sensation ran through David's body. Fear



mixed with adrenaline coursed through his veins. Cold sweat beaded on his face and neck. He shivered, choking over each breath, as his mouth filled with a bitter metallic taste. The firing started again, then stopped. On and off. Guns and screaming, then silence. Each time, the shots sounded closer. A feeling swelled within him that it was coming, slowly; an immense horror was coming. He grasped at the hope that living at the end of the road might save them. *Please*, he thought, in a prayer of desperation, *please, I don't want to die. Not here. Not like this. Please. Make it go away.* Then he heard screams from just down the street, followed by gunfire. His chest and throat constricted. Nausea overtook his body. His eyes burned from the dust.

All the sounds around David fell into silence. He felt suspended, spinning in absolute blackness—not even a hint of light. All he could hear and feel was his heart, throbbing as though it would rip free of his chest. No light entered the window. There was only blackness through which no sound penetrated. And in the very center of his heart burned terror, deeper and darker than any fear. Exposed within that terror, he knew there was nothing that could protect him. Taking quick, shallow breaths, he closed his eyes and prayed that the silence could last forever.

Just then, static crackled from the radio: “237, this is Roving Patrol. Do you copy, 237?”

David’s dad groped for the receiver. Grabbing it, he whispered meekly into it, “They’re just down the street.” His voice cracked. “They’re almost here . . . please.”

“We’re with you, 237. Just hold tight. We’re breaking through. Out.”

At the gate, there was a low rumble and the grind-

ing of metal. All of the sounds around David suddenly became clear. He was no longer spinning. He felt the dust, rough like sand, pressed against his skin. The snap of the gate’s metal padlock was followed by the crunch of gravel beneath tires. He could hear people running toward the shed. David tried to stand, reaching for something to hold onto, but fell hard to the ground, his legs tingling beneath him.



A vertical band of light sliced through the darkness as the doors to the shed separated. Men stood, silhouetted against the blinding light. One of the men lifted David onto his shoulders. David faded into unconsciousness, relief and exhaustion enveloping his body. He could hear Tamara sobbing, “Can’t leave . . . I can’t leave my Moses!”

The steady rumble of car engines surrounded David as he awoke with a sudden shudder of coldness. He lifted his throbbing head and looked around, disoriented. Through the rear window of the truck, David saw a convoy of white Land Rovers, one with an American flag fixed to its top, the flag ironed stiff by the wind. As the convoy drove north, the tires churned a wake of dust. Resting his head against the bulletproof Plexiglass, David watched hollow-eyed and mute as they drove past villages and dense forest. The Kagera River soon came into view. In its shallows was a mass grave of swollen corpses. Bodies were strewn everywhere along the banks. Children lay sliced in half, and mothers with live babies strapped to their backs were sprawled dead.

The river flowed red with blood.

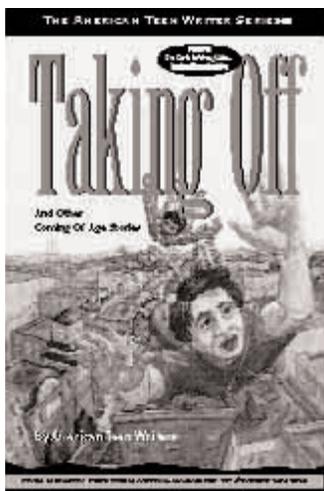
Men exited the mud-brick houses along the dust road, clawing machetes, screwdrivers, and knives that glistened in the early morning light. They stood in the blood-red dust; the hate had already enveloped them. As the convoy sped toward the border, David thought about Moses and Tamara. And deep within was a hollowness, a knowing that this immense horror had changed his eyes forever.

Cloaking a crest of hills just ahead, the storm rose upward as it pressed against the red sky of dawn. And shimmering against the backdrop of storm clouds, the emerald rain seemed to be repelled from the earth by a dome of red dust.

The wind whimpered over fallen grass, and then a mist of silence veiled the dawn. “Just over those hills, beyond the rain,” said the driver, “is the border.” A thick red haze bled through the trees. ★

### Coming of Age Stories by American Teen Writers

The classic coming of age theme in fiction is addressed here by 14 teen authors—not by adult writers looking back. Nominated by ALA as a Best Book for Young Adults. The New York Public Library selected this book for its venerable list, Books for the Teen Age. Recommended for grades 9-12.



See page 47 or 87 for more information. —Merlyn