

Sunflower

By Vanneihluanga

Translated from Mizo by K.C. Lalthlamuani*

Abstract

This is an essay in which the narrator ruminates on the depravity of this world. He becomes cynical and unenthusiastic of life. Confused with the loss of honesty and integrity he starts running away from the city. Attracted by a steep and unkempt route, he excitedly presses on. The tiresome climb makes him question his stupidity as there are numerous other more inviting choices. Upon reaching a spot of scenic beauty, with greens and flowers and the chirping of birds he realizes that only the opening seemed daunting and ventures to reach the top. Finally arriving at the top of the mountain, he is demoralized by the barrenness. It was extremely sunny, everything was dry and his throat was parched. The hope of a bright future had made him unaware of his tiredness. Sighting a shriveled sunflower, the narrator ponders on his Self. Despite its inadequate nourishment, the flower patiently perseveres to accomplish the Creator's intention and blooms; whilst he, suffocated and vexed by the hypocritical world, attempted to distance himself. While thus realizing his wantonness and confessing his sins, he saw a ruffled man who told him of the voracious nature of the sunflower in its attempt to preserve and germinate the seeds itself crushed other living object in the vicinity. In despair the narrator makes a resolution and descends. Turning his back on the mountain and the flower, he proceeds towards the valley.

Keywords: pessimist, mystifying machine, hope, nothingness, depravity.

If I were to be measured according to the world's scale, and supposing this scale is accurate, then it would be found that I am too small even to measure up to it. I am just smart enough to know that I am a failure, well know enough for easy humiliation, rich enough to know the richness of others, I earn enough just to know the benefits of rest, and the things they call blessings which I have been bestowed with, instead of showing me my

fortune against those poorer than me, it has merely led me to aspire for things beyond my reach. Wanting and needing are part of my existence, and I along with my common sense are now drowning in the tide of desire and greed, losing my humanity and, so it seems, gradually turning into a wanting machine.

Because of this, I enjoy being a pessimist like one suffering from an

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addiction. The things others call white seem black to me, like the slow-paced lemur I battle the light, beautiful colours anger me, darkness and I suit each other, and it is in darkness that I search food for my mind and soul.

I went to a place of worship in search of insouciance, but ended up being called 'a sinner' from a place I dare not reply to. On Mondays, I go for work along with others, albeit diffidently, in a large vehicle, only to be told to 'push back!', when I am already at my last ditch. And after a hard day's labour, I get back in the same vehicle where it is impossible to reach home without hearing again the order to 'push back!' While everyone moves forward, I keep going backwards, to the extent that sometimes, if possible, I wish I could back all the way out of this world of regression. However, when one is fit and fine, and breathes the same air as others, with obligations entrusted upon me whilst I am busy counting the days of life, to back out of life on one's own accord would, according to the world's opinion, not only be humiliating, but also mortifying for one's relatives. And since I am a child of that same world, I am still alive to write this.

Like others, I have been spending years thinking I had a bright future. I studied what others studied, taught by teachers who taught the same way. Instead of wisdom I learnt how to give the right answers, my accomplishments written down instead of being tested in reality. Instead of knowledge I earned a certificate. I did not understand what I studied, why I studied it, and what exactly I would reach by studying.

The Mystifying Machine

So I soon absorbed that knowledge. Used the certificate which measured my knowledge to get a government job, and since the day I began working, my mind started becoming weak believing that it could only contemplate soft gruel for meals. There is no hard labour in my place of work because here physical labour is considered extremely revolting. Work merely involves following the order 'do it' by a lower rank from a higher rank. Instead of being a place where skills and practicality are used to formulate great plans, it is where everyone competes at indulging their self-interest using government's funds. A sincere worker is ridiculed instead of praised, when there is money there is no moral, and where salary is earned by position instead of labour. Some days involve a tiring effort to conceal a lie let loose by a higher rank, and on other days one is forced to sit back and watch like one with cramps unable to do anything, while seeing the wrong done by others. If all your youth is spent being brainwashed in such a place, even someone as normal as you will inevitably come out light headed.

And so, that mystifying machine, despite it being invented to narrow the gap between the rich and poor in fact widens it. Instead of it being the defender of the unfortunate, it robs them of their share, instead of protecting others' freedom, it suppresses their rights. But we are not allowed to speak up against it, to the extent that you would be digging your own grave

if you spelt out the names of the corrupt, and the most courageous thing we dare do is content ourselves with gossip about the injustice.

When I look at the other professions including business and the market place, there is no hesitation for duplicity and trickery, where nobody has any qualms in employing any method to outdo one another. Then I look at religious places, and I see quantity being put above depth and sincerity, where the claim of being the true congregation is put above spiritual freedom, where the pursuit of self projection play a more prominent role than God, and where one goes against the very scriptures that they preach by amassing their fortunes on earth. I do not feel safe within such boundaries.

The wise man exposed

Since this place we live in is claimed and ruled over by such people, the voice of the ones who want justice and wisdom can no longer be heard by the human ears. The ones who want a change of system have lost all hope, but they know such despair will reach a bursting point, and are now merely waiting for the explosion so they may watch the flames from a safe distance. Some still cling onto hope and look upon social organisations to lead the way. But even such organisations have lost their main objective to promote public good and instead use their positions to exercise power for personal gain. While they believe themselves to be doing salutary work, they are in fact destroying the very foundation of our culture. Instead

of working out a meaningful role to the end, they only manage to add to damage and problems by interfering.

The ones in power are the first to recognise such situations. But instead of striving to fix it, they hastily cover it up before others detect it and demand change. What they fear most is that the eyes of the people who put them in power, namely the common mass, might be opened one day and they will strive towards a better life. The power group need a vote base of the poor common man whom they can satisfy with the gift of a new vest just prior to an election, people just smart enough to hope for a brighter future, believing their vote will bring salvation, but in truth gullible enough to not know the real mechanisms of politics. Indeed, what such power groups require is a mass base of such people they can entice with empty promises, food and a white lie.

Such persons utilise any means and method to stay in power. Lying is their most effective weapon, followed by religion and denomination. With no regard for propriety, they employ select verses from the Holy Scriptures to justify themselves; they are seasonal born again Christians, who can be emulate deep spirituality when occasion demands, yet their sins remain firmly intact. They do not fear their fellow humans, indeed, they do not fear God himself.

Towards the hill

What am I doing in such a world? At first I wanted to work for its solution. But every ray of hope is continually

shadowed by a cloud of despair. When every untruth is considered 'in vogue' by everyone, I begin to find myself out of touch. So I tried in vain to accept the untrue as true, increasingly regard the bad as good. From the top of the mountain of desire I take the leap to become a slave of carelessness, which makes me knock on the door of self promotion, disregarding my common sense, but my common sense will not allow it. My mind becomes confused, making me stand on the threshold of indecision, and like I mentioned in the beginning, to the point of no longer wishing to live.

I look around me and find injustice in every corner, and I suspect everyone of siding with it, and there is no use if only I alone speak against it. 'What the majority accepts is the right opinion' becomes the norm whose sound is becoming louder and louder, and you can no longer block your ears against it. I know that just because they are more in number does not make them right, but I can no longer bear to stand alone against them.

So I run around, covering my ears, not knowing where to run to. There is a crowd around me, going about their business, their steps unfaltering. No one pays me any attention. Suppose I stop, and start agreeing with what is wrong, doing what is 'in vogue', I could comfortably wait for my dying day and be considered a wise man. But still I run, not knowing what I am afraid of, not because I am wiser than others, but simply because I am troubled by the world around me.

I am not an athlete, and I do not think I am a fast runner. But I believe I ran fast enough, because the sound of the people soon faded, and before long I left the city and reached a crossroad with several routes.

By leaps and bounds

In the midst of a thick fog, among cobwebs and narrow lanes, I reach a steep route going uphill. I do not know where this road leads. So I look around more intently and questioned myself on the reason as to why the most unkempt route attracts me when there are numerous other more inviting choices. I start to feel stupid for not only running away but choosing such a tiring road when there are better choices, while back in the city, people are picking on the crumbs dropped from the table of the royal family. But for a grown man to be as desperate as me, nothing is crazy or inappropriate anymore. Since my desire to continue my climb is far greater than my desire to go back, and because my desire to tread the narrow road is immense, I began walking on that path.

As I start walking, I realise I am excited, and the road is better than I imagined it to be, and it dawned on me that only the beginning had seemed daunting. I continue to climb up, realizing that the higher I reached, the clearer my vision, till I find myself reaching a place of scenic beauty, with greenery and flowers all around. All those years I saw only humans and their surroundings, trying to quench my thirst in it, but now I have breathed fresh air in a place

untouched by men. I experience peaceful release, so I continue climbing excitedly.

There's not a sound of man to be heard, only the chirping of birds. Though I could not actually see it, as I climbed higher, I could tell that the top of the hill was covered by clouds. And the feeling that that place would even be more pleasant made me climb even more excitedly.

I finally reached the place covered by clouds. But here, flowers and greenery had no place. What I thought were clouds turned out to be smoke, like those rising from a recently burned jhum. There was no beauty to admire, nothing to pull at one's heartstrings, everything that made me eager to climb have all been but thrown away.

But, I had the belief that beyond the smoke, there exists a place so pleasant, a place from which one could see the whole world. I have climbed this far, it would be wrong to go back without reaching the place I long for. My heart's desire that preoccupies me is beyond the smoke, it would be a crime to not proceed towards it.

Climbing is a tiring task. However, the belief in the existence of a bright new world ahead of me made me unaware of my tired body and fatigued soul, and I climbed on. Beyond the smoke, the air cleared. It was extremely hot and sunny, and everything was dry. My throat was parched. There was nothing that caught my eye which would make me want to climb here, nothing to long for. Except for the peak of the hill.

Yes, neither was the surrounding pleasant nor the road easy, yet I climbed on because of the hope that there's something at the top which would answer all my questions and quench my thirst. I finally made it to the top, barely alive, and looked around with great hope.

The hill top

Nothing! No nothing! There is nothing to be found here but nothingness. Everything is as dry as can be. I fell down, panting with panic and thirst. Just when I believed that I was on the verge of unearthing the answer to everything, I face utter emptiness. How disheartening! How very painful it all was!

So it is here that I, one no longer content with the universe, who can no longer count any fellow-man an accomplice, who considers himself righteous enough to even condemn the heavens, confronts the Creator, my shout echoing across the surrounding hills and valleys, "God, you made me climb this mountain despite many risks, only so you can drag me into complete despair? What kind of God are you? I challenge you to come down here, and better fight me then!"

Lo! Behold!

My voice dwindles, my helplessness deepens. Looking around, my eyes fall upon a small desiccated Sunflower in the middle of the hill on which I was standing. Making my way towards it, I saw that it did not have sufficient nutrients like soil, water, air and sunshine and was feebly

hanging on for dear life in this desolate place.

But then, I contemplate on myself – I am educated, a capable leader able to influence and regulate people's opinions. I live a systematically organized life, fulfilling my obligations as head of the family. Being conspicuous wherever I go, people look up to me for guidance and counsel. What would a withered Sunflower teach an astute man like me? I ruminated.

Suddenly, I was infuriated, and wilfully confronted not the flower but the Creator, "Am I, created in the image of the Creator to be despised atop this mount? Why have you done this to me?" Getting no response, I reluctantly force myself to look again at the sunflower.

Yes! The sunflower does not need anybody's compliment to sprout and flower, neither will it be more beautiful with people's acclamations. It requires a lot of patience and endurance to bloom. It strives to accomplish the Creator's intention without ample sustenance and is not disheartened amidst the storms and bugs that plague it. Though not as huge and big as saucers like other sunflowers, the mere fact that it blooms even draws bees to it. Therefore, to me this sunflower is akin to the most beautiful flowers. I admired its humility and frankness, and longed to linger by its side for good.

Despite its miserable location, this sunflower incessantly seeks to accomplish the Creator's motive without complaints. Not distraught by the wretchedness of its

condition, the manifold problems in its habitat, it seeks no solution nor does it try to abscond. This sunflower patiently perseveres to look up at the scorching sun. Though the initiator of its misery especially during the dry seasons when it is parched with thirst, the sunflower neither blames, nor betrays the sun for its disagreeable condition. It does not desist from looking up at the heated sun and compliantly acknowledges it as its benefactor, its source of strength.

As for me, with the belief that this is a hypocritical world, and not worth living in, I strove to find a solution but could not, I attempted to distance myself but didn't know how, and yet dared not efface myself. Disinclined to live, I am suffocated in a duplicitous world, preoccupied with the sins of others around me. This restrains me from praising my Creator, represses my abilities, and my life tapers into nothingness. This is my depravity.

To end in Smoke!

Whilst confessing my sins at this high altar, I turn towards the west below and see a ruffled man, one whom people would deem a scientist excitedly clambering up the hill towards me, showing no signs of exhaustion. On seeing me he burst into laughter while I had the presumption that we would shake hands and exchange salutations. At length he stopped for a moment and said, "Friend, I was going to blame you but I am at fault. I should have reached this mountain top before you to inform you of the true nature

of this sunflower. But, you preceded me and just as I feared, this sunflower has already deceived you.”

When I asked him why, he waved his arms and replied “There is nothing to admire in this sunflower. It is just a gadget joined together for the pollination of seeds. A beautiful flower is merely a capricious woman trying to entice a man with her red lips while the leaves and stems are akin to the bed of fornication. This frivolous flower does not have a particular lover, and does not object to enjoying the pleasures with whomever she is able to lure with her red lips and perfumes. This scrawny sunflower in particular, proud of its bloom, prominently exposes its sexuality on its head for all the world to see. So, you are wasted in confessing your sins before such an abominable and shameless thing,” he harshly stated.

Astounded and overwhelmed, I made an effort replying with difficulty, “I don’t believe.”

As if he had great forbearance, the man lowering his tone resumed “Evidence is necessary to prove that something is

right. Look here, let us use this sunflower as justification. Examine closely its vibrant colour”. Snapping the flower, he carried on “Look closely, where does its beauty lie? The thing which you have known as beautiful is only one part of its pollinating process; that which is inside is merely where its seeds are collected. Voraciously, it preserves the seeds attempting to germinate them itself. It ravenously partakes of the water, fertility of the soil and the air around it to make this materialize. It cannot tolerate any other living object in the vicinity and strives to crush them. This being its nature is justified by its very bloom.”

Were I to believe this man, my life would be spent in despondency. But I cannot be sceptical as he could prove the truth of his words. Therefore, I do not know what to say or how to respond to him.

For some reason or other, I was humiliated, unable to face the world. Looking to the ground, I made a resolution to descend and turning my back on the mountain and the flower, I despairingly proceeded towards the valley.

Source

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Vanneihluanga is a prolific Mizo writer, who has written several short stories, plays, articles and essays whose eccentrically witty expression has received wide acclaim for their social criticism.