Writing on the Edge:
Great Contemporary Writers on the Front Line of Crisis

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Excerpt

Burundi
Tracy Chevalier

The anonymous brown metal gate we approach is not far from the city market and the bus station in the center of Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi. At the sound of our car, a guard opens a slit at eye level in the gate, looks at us, then slowly opens up. We drive into a large garden where a one-story pale yellow house sits. The grounds are enclosed by a high wall and consist mostly of scrubby grass and high weeds that a man is cutting with a scythe; clumps of bougainvillea, palm and banana trees provide needed shade.

Women and children are clustered on the steps of the house. As we come close they stare at us, and I try not to stare at them. We step inside. It is cool and calm here in the waiting room. More women and children are sitting along the sofas and chairs. Women have been arriving since 6 a.m., some of them walking in or taking busses from the countryside. Some are accompanied by family or friends. Others—like a local schoolgirl in her blue and white uniform, or a sixty-year-old grandmother of sixteen from the north—chose to come alone. More are coming in all the time; by the end of the morning the room will be overflowing. It is Monday morning. It has been a busy weekend for some. Most of these women and girls have been raped.

I came expecting to see tears and grimaces, hear shrieks and cries, but the women are impassive. They speak quietly to their companions, or to strangers they meet in the room, but mostly they sit silently, waiting. Children wander in and out. A five-year-old girl raped four months ago sits on the floor in the sunlight playing with wooden dolls.

Partly the subdued atmosphere may be shock—some women, like the schoolgirl, were raped just hours ago. Partly it may be a desire to quell emotions in front of strangers. But the lack of drama may also have something to do with the Burundian character itself. Again and again I am told that, unlike in other African countries, people here

don't show much emotion; everything is hidden. It's true that while I am in Burundi I don't see people laughing or shouting quite so much as in other places I've been. Except for the children—they smile and laugh and run after me just as much as children elsewhere. Something must happen to Burundians at adulthood—unofficially considered to be age twelve, when many stop school and some even marry (though the legal age for marriage is eighteen)—that makes them push feelings under the surface. Perhaps that is why rape flourishes here more than in many countries: it is easy to hide it when everything else is hidden too.

Bujumbura sits on Lake Tanganyika; across the lake hangs a wall of forbidding mountains like something out of *Lord of the Rings*, with the Democratic Republic of Congo beyond. The Congo is by all accounts a mess, and airs its problems publicly; rumors proliferate about savage killings, systematic rape, even cannibalism. By comparison, Burundi seems sedate. Bujumbura itself is a straightforward African city, with decently paved roads, constant electricity, a huge market, banks, shops, schools, even a public swimming pool. For all its apparent orderliness, however, Bujumbura is rife with violence and lawlessness; its middle-class neighborhoods are walled off with guards for each house. There was a civil war in Burundi between 1993 and 2002, and although it didn't succumb to the large-scale massacres its neighbor Rwanda has become infamous for, it shares similar ethnic tensions between Hutus and Tutsis, as well as an erosion of the social fabric that normally reins in illegal activities and antisocial behavior. The postwar Burundian government is still an interim one, awaiting the elections that will turn it into a real democracy. Although the war tore it apart economically and socially—it was ranked 173rd out of 177 countries in the UN's 2004 Human Development Report—nonetheless Burundi feels like a country with a chance, on the verge of improving enormously. However, Bujumbura is ringed with foothills hiding guerrillas opposed to the government. The city is under curfew, and there is gunfire at night.

The Women's Health Centre we are visiting was opened in September 2003 by Médecins Sans Frontières. It offers medical treatment and psychological counseling for people who have been raped. Previously such victims had gone to MSF's long-established Centre for War Wounded in another neighborhood. There women and children coming in who had been raped might well find themselves alongside their

rapists being treated for gunshot wounds or fractures. It became clear that women needed a place where they could go and feel both protected and anonymous. Besides taking in rape victims, the Women's Health Centre also offers family planning and treatment of sexually transmitted disease (STD), partly as a cover so that people won't assume that everyone coming in has been raped. Rape is its primary concern, however. It now receives 150 rape cases a month, whereas only five to ten per month come for advice on family planning.

Most victims of rape come initially to get antiretrovirals, medicine that can prevent HIV infection. It needs to be administered within seventy-two hours to be effective and has to be taken for twenty-eight days. There has been a widespread, effective campaign to educate the Burundian population about AIDS, and people here are terrified of it, though in relative terms it is not as bad a problem here as in other African countries: 8.3 percent of adults are HIV-positive in Burundi, compared to 20 percent in South Africa, 25 percent in Zimbabwe, and 36 percent in Botswana. Most rape victims come to the MSF clinic initially to obtain the drug, but are also medically examined, tested for STD, and counseled by a psychologist. There are follow-up appointments one and six months later.

The clinic is run by women, with only the guards, the drivers, and the gardeners men. The place has a calm, purposeful, practical energy about it. In fact, I notice that about women in general in Burundi: though they wield little economic or political power, they remain the dynamo behind the wheels of society. Women here never sit idly by the roadside the way men do. They are always doing something: carrying water, selling things in the market, tending children, working in the fields with baby strapped to back. Even their clothes are more vibrant—they wear colourful sarongs and head scarves, while the men tend toward western T-shirts and trousers.

The local staff at the center are well educated, well trained, and well dressed, and manage that tricky balance between the sympathetic and the practical so needed in situations like this. I am not so deft. When I try to talk to women who have been raped I hesitate to ask for the details of what happened to them. I feel tripped up by the myriad emotions the idea of rape brings with it, wherever it occurs: horror, embarrassment, prudishness, voyeurism. At one point I sit out on the steps with an

older woman and another schoolgirl, both of whom speak French as well as Kirundi, the local language. They are both here for their six-month checkups. I ask them lots of questions that skirt around the main topic but bottle out of mentioning rape directly. It feels too stark and disrespectful to say, “So, about your rape—tell me what happened.”

Célestine, one of the psychologists at the center, is not so squeamish. She shows me an outline of the questions she runs through and issues she covers with each victim. They range from specific details of the rape—Where did he touch you? What did he say? Did he hurt you? Did you cry?—to questions about other aspects of the victim’s life that have been affected. How do you feel about your body? Are you able to sleep? Do you worry about safety? Who do you feel you can talk to? By talking them through what happened, she helps them to purge themselves of the experience. Célestine may well be the only person they feel they can talk to.

I sit in on a session she conducts with Françoise, the sixty-year-old grandmother, and a widow of several years. She wears a green, yellow, and orange head scarf, from which black and gray curls poke out. Célestine makes constant eye contact and half-smiles as she speaks softly and calmly with Françoise, keeping her talking. Though I don’t understand Kirundi, it sounds like Françoise is telling her what happened in great detail. She shows little obvious emotion, except that now and then she leans to one side and puts a hand to her forehead. “She’s ashamed that a woman her age would be raped,” Célestine explains. “She hasn’t told anyone and never will.” She’s only come to the clinic now—two months after the rape—because she’s got pain in her abdomen. (Tests reveal Françoise has contracted an STD.) She lied to her children about why she’s come all the way to Bujumbura.

At the end of the session, Françoise looks directly at me for the first time. “I want to know about you,” she says. That seems fair, so I tell her what I can and show her a photo of my son. “Only one child?” she says. “I thank God that I have had so many children!” I take her pity on the chin. When I promise to keep her secret safe, Françoise smiles at me. I have changed her name for this piece, as for all of the rape victims and their families.

Françoise's age is relatively unusual. The majority of rape victims in Burundi are under eighteen, and many are very young girls—perhaps because they are clearly virgins and thus will not pass on the AIDS virus. A few rapists even believe that sex with a virgin will cure them of their own HIV status. I hear of other superstitions as well: sex with a dwarf will bring you luck; sex with an old woman will bring you wisdom.

At the center I meet girls five, ten, fourteen, and seventeen years old who have been raped. The youngest victim I meet in at her home, about ten kilometers from Buhiga, a northern town where MSF recently set up another sexual violence center, alongside a hospital it supports and a nutrition center. Christine is two years, ten months old and the previous week was raped by a houseboy. The atmosphere here is lighter than you would expect, given what has happened. In part this may be due to decent material circumstances. The house—a hut by western standards—is bigger and better built than others I sat in, made of new local bricks and a tin roof, and another building is under construction. The kitchen floor may be packed dirt, but it is full of food—branches of bananas, tins of oil, sacks of manioc flour. There are two beds, and a table with solid wooden chairs rather than stools made of boxes. Christine and her mother, Beatrice, wear clean, new-ish clothes—Christine in a white dress and striped sweater, Beatrice in a red and white shirt, a green and white sarong, and a scarf hiding her hair. Beatrice has five boys and another girl, all in school as we talk. An eleven-year-old neighbor looks after Christine when Beatrice is working in the fields or selling lenga-lenga—a leafy vegetable similar to spinach—at the market. Clearly they are better off than some if she can afford to send so many children to school and pay a houseboy too. Here even the poor hire others poorer than they to help out.

Money helps, of course, but the atmosphere I attribute largely to Christine and Beatrice themselves. Christine is a solid, feisty little character, and the moment I meet her I know she's going to be OK. Most children her age who have been through such a traumatic experience would be terrified of strangers, but Christine is only momentarily put off. Soon she is giving us good long looks, her round face curious, her chin set, her gaze straight. She obediently stands with her mother for a photo taken from the back but can't resist looking around at Tom—not peeking timidly, but staring, sizing him up.

Beatrice is equally charismatic. A small woman with a fine-boned, expressive face, she speaks in a soft voice that still carries, like a well-trained singer. She is clear in her beliefs, and it is easy to see where her daughter gets her determination. Mother and daughter are obviously crazy about each other. As we sit inside while a sudden rainstorm hammers on the roof, they keep their arms wrapped around each other, Christine happy and cheeky on her mother's lap.

Christine was left alone with the houseboy—actually a man of eighteen—for only a short while, but sadly it was long enough. Beatrice had gone to the fields, the other children were at school, and the babysitter went out for a moment to get some milk. When she returned she found the man on top of Christine. He ran off but was caught and is now in jail. Christine showed her mother what happened with the houseboy using gestures. Beatrice took her to a nearby doctor, who confirmed that she had been raped, though it appears that she was not completely penetrated—which may be good news for her future, as virginity is highly prized and a necessity if a girl wants to marry.

Christine has not cried since just after the rape, nor spoken of it. But at night she has nightmares, and her mother holds her close then as she does now. "I love her so much," Beatrice says. Eventually I find out that Christine is likely to be her last child—Beatrice is forty-four—and that three other daughters have died. Children are so important to women here that usually the first question I ask them is how many they have. They tell me how many boys and girls, but there is always a ghostly third number lurking behind the others—the number of children who died, of the usual killers: cholera, malaria, typhoid, malnutrition.

All seems well now with Christine and her mother, except for one factor. It is easy to forget the fathers in situations like this. Beatrice's husband is a soldier and lives in a camp that the rest of the family moved from a year ago because they had found it hard to make ends meet there. They came to where they were able to buy a piece of land, but it means that the father has to live apart from his wife and children. Christine's father knows about the rape now—Beatrice sent a member of the family to tell him. She thinks he will come back to them in two days, on Saturday. According to her, it is

for her husband to decide what should be done about the jailed houseboy. She is Christian and believes in forgiveness. “When my husband comes back,” she says, “if the man accepts that’s he’s done something bad and asks for his forgiveness, my husband will give it because he knows God. It is not for us to judge him.”

Whether Beatrice’s husband will be so forgiving toward her is less certain. She fears he will be angry, perhaps at his daughter but more likely at Beatrice. Beatrice’s face tightens. What can she do to placate him? Allison, the MSF coordinator, offers to speak to him about the medication Christine is taking and to explain that it isn’t Christine or Beatrice’s fault. But all of us women in the room—mother and daughter, MSF staff and me—know that it is difficult to stem the tide of a husband’s fury at his wife. Throughout Saturday I wonder if he has arrived home yet, if he has hit Beatrice or Christine or thrown them out. I wonder still.

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Léocadie is one of many women at the Bujumbura health center remarkably open about speaking of their experiences and willing to be photographed head-on, even when given many opportunities to say no or be photographed from the back or in silhouette to preserve anonymity. The center is careful to make the records of these women confidential, using an elaborate code system and locking records away. The stigma of rape is very strong in Burundi—as it is in most places. Rape victims are not named in newspaper reports in Britain either.

Léocadie is twenty and lives in a distant province; she took a bus to get to Bujumbura. She has a one-month-old son wrapped in blue and yellow cloth, whom she breastfeeds while we talk. Her son keeps his eyes fixed on her as he feeds; when he opens his mouth to yawn, his tongue is white with milk.

She was raped when she was almost five months’ pregnant. She sells maize in the market; sometimes when she doesn’t have enough from her own field, neighbors give her some of theirs to sell. One day a neighbor offered her some of his, leading her to an isolated corner of his field and then raping her. “He was very strong,” she says. “He put a hand around my throat and the other over my mouth.” He did not seem to care that she was visibly pregnant.

Léocadie is here for her six-month checkup and has found out that she is not HIV-positive. That is one stroke of luck in her life. She was not so lucky after her first visit to the clinic: she remained for a week so that her pregnancy could be monitored, and when she returned to her village she discovered her husband had left her because of the rape, taking their three-year-old daughter with him. Léocadie has seen her daughter just twice since then and says she and her husband are “divorced,” though possibly not in the legal sense. She has also moved from the village, after neighbors were mean to her, and now lives among Christian neighbors who she says are much kinder. She used to run into her attacker’s wife and would say hello but little more. They never discussed what happened. The man has run off; that violent moment in the cornfield has broken up two marriages.

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Throughout the interviews, I ask women why the men did it. They give concrete answers: Satan made him; he was badly brought up; his father also raped women and he inherited the urge; he is a madman; he wanted a wife. None said anything about how badly women fare generally in Burundi, or the male domination that keeps them so downtrodden. They are fatalistic, which may explain why Christianity is so popular here, with its promise of a better life after death. None of the women’s answers really gets to the heart of the question: why do men do this to women? This is not a question limited to Burundi or third-world countries. Men rape two-year-old girls in Britain too, and no one knows why. Though I may be disgusted and upset by what I hear from Burundian women, it is not the response of the righteous, but rather the wary nod of recognition.

At least in Britain rapists are punished when caught. In Burundi all too often they go free, even when they are known. One boy, whose thirteen-year-old deaf and mute sister was raped by a neighbor, told me he still sees the man in the market sometimes but will do nothing because the man’s family has threatened his if they try to go to court. In several other cases the man is in jail but is unlikely to be tried—delays and costs often put victims’ families off. MSF refers victims who wish to pursue justice to organizations such as Avocats Sans Frontières (Lawyers Without Borders) who try to help. ASF has seen just two cases from the MSF center through to a court ruling (one

found guilty, one acquitted) and is now working on forty more rape cases referred from various organizations.

That doesn't mean the victims have given up on justice, however. "I want him to die in prison now," declares Alice, a spirited ten-year-old who was raped the previous day by a neighbor's son while her mother was at Mass (60 percent of the population is Catholic). Her mother, elegant in a purple satin dress and head scarf, looks a little embarrassed at her daughter's headstrong response. "Perhaps he should just remain in prison forever," the mother modifies. Actually, I think to myself, Alice got it about right.

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On our last day we visit Josephine just south of Bujumbura in a neighborhood made up of people displaced by the civil war. Such neighborhoods are chronically poor and lack the social cohesion of a more established community. It is full of people who have lost everything—home, job, family—and radiates vulnerability. The director of the local health center tells me they receive on average eight rape cases a month—though there are surely many more committed—and the rapists are often government soldiers or members of former guerrilla groups that have been absorbed into the army and prey on those least able to fight back.

Josephine is sixteen and has a one-month-old son whose father is her rapist. She has a catlike face, with high, wide cheekbones, slanted brown eyes, and full lips drawn around a small mouth. She wears a yellow shirt and a blue and green sarong, and sits with me on a woven mat on the dirt floor of an empty room. Josephine shares this and another room (also empty except for a plastic mat she lays her son on) with a widow who has taken her in. I have begun to understand what poor means in this country, and this is as bad as it gets—no furniture, no food, no clothes but what she has on.

Josephine used to live out in the countryside with her parents. They were killed in 2002, toward the end of the war. She has no brothers or sisters. She ended up in an area for displaced people in Bujumbura called Kiname, where ten months ago unknown robbers broke in and raped her. Neighbors heard her cries and helped her get to a local health center. She was passed between various local associations—of which there are surprisingly many—who ended up moving her to this new

neighborhood. Josephine's upper lip wrinkles with almost genteel scorn when asked about her circumstances. "I would rather be back in Kiname," she says. "It's not so poor as here."

She has few opinions about the direction her life has taken, why she was raped, or what will become of her. My questions slide off her and begin to seem ridiculous. Cushioned by material well being, health care, and education, I have the luxury of ranging far away from the present—analyzing the past, anticipating the future. Josephine, however, lives completely in the moment: she does not dwell on her wretched past and shrugs when asked about the future. I have never met anyone so completely disconnected from the continuum of time. Past and future may as well not exist; there is only her son's open mouth that needs filling, his body to be washed and clothed. She asks for food—she admits she doesn't eat every day, even though she is breastfeeding—for clothing, for soap. Those are her immediate needs.

Josephine is the last woman I interview before I leave Burundi, and she abruptly enlarges the picture I have been focusing on all week by refusing to engage with the trauma of her rape. I ask her at last which has affected her life more, the rape or the war. "The war, of course," she responds promptly, "for it is still affecting me." She gestures at the nothingness around her. She is polite with her answer but I feel naïve to have asked such a question. The rape at least gave her a son, the one concrete, positive thing in her life. "He is my future," she says, much more concerned about him than any possible future husband.

When Tom suggests that she cover her face with her hands to preserve her anonymity for the photos, Josephine thinks for a moment, then reaches up and pulls the polka-dotted scarf from her hair and winds it around her face, leaving one eye exposed. It is a confident gesture worthy of a fashion shoot; in another life, with her bee-stung lips and her self-possession, Josephine might have been a model. In another life, she might have been many things. She is here, though, and her hand-to-mouth existence is likely to be punctuated by hunger, hardship, and loss until she at last loses her own life. She stands in the doorway holding her baby and watching us go, and I feel I have lost her already.