

# EDITORIAL

Johnny was cautious when asking about Blackie's death. It was dusk and the boys, bare-chested and sweating slapped domino tiles on the makeshift table under a rusty hurricane lantern. They casually pointed to the spot where the head stopped rolling. There was dry blood where the water was not effective. They laughed about his stupidity and returned to the game promising Johnny a game afterwards. Johnny watched Blackie's brother calmly slapping down the tiles. He was no grieving. "Life is cheap, Johnny". A young man said sucking on a matchstick. "Round here you could die over the simplest thing". Johnny walked out of the ghetto that night more concerned for his safety than ever before. Blackie was dead because he had stolen his friend's orange. The value of life was so relative. In this shanty-town life seemed cheap. Death was a way of life.

For many of us, death is treated with such respect and fear that an account like this would leave us schocked as Johnny was. But for those used to seeing death around them, while the pain may still exist as a result of loss; the commonness of the occurrence demands a certain hardness which can be called a coping mechanism. There are those who cope by accepting a religious position which retrieves death from a finality that gives it the power to distress, and allows for an afterlife which renders death relatively harmless. For others, death is an ultimate expression of sacrifice and by dying they express their fullest conviction about an issue. Those who die for a cause usually believe som completely in the cause that it becomes even more important than their lives.

For those who are confronted with the option of death for "the cause" versus life to the detriment of "the cause" there is the chance to consider, balance and the decide. Unfortunately, some of us are confronted with death over a decision that we made without realizing the cost. Rushdie, for the past few weeks may have asked himself whether he is willing to die for his book the *Satanic Verses*. His death could make him a possibly unwilling martyr for the cause of artistic freedom. However, while his action of writing the book may not have entailed consideration of the mortal dangers involved in its publication; those of us writers like himself, who are faced with the choice as to whether to support him or not are now forced to question whether the freedom to write any such material without fear of death-threats is worth dying for. I am convinced that the hesitancy with which other writers responded to his plight had a lot to do with their grappling with the question of the danger in taking action. Now they are marching and proclaiming that Rushdie is being victimized. The writing community is putting itself on the line, but we must appreciate that today such action on the part of any individual is a bold and worthy of respect. What Rushdie now faces, perhaps unbeknownst to him when he began to write the novel, is what many authors have faced in countries in which literature written is enough evidence to have an individual "executed". Such writers consider carefully what they write and whenever they take a stance it is one which they are willing to die for. This kind of responsibility may seem unreasonable and quite extreme for writers, but it certainly ensures that the literature produced has substance and heart. As a writer, I am reminded of the responsibility that I have in communicating with the larger world in fiction and non-fiction. While I condemn the kind of action being taken against Rushdie; I have learnt something important from it.

Johnny walked away from the settlement, though the graveyard and out onto the orange lit lane. He did not stop at the grave of his friend. Every sudden sound disturbed him, he was cautious about what he said to those in the area, now he looked at them. The men by the walls nodded at him. The fear tickled his armpit. He had walked through this lane many times before, joked at the men, argued with them, now it was different. He felt happy to have lived so long. Death was easy in the jungle of zinc walls and standpipes. Johnny contemplated staying away forever. Then he considered the friends at the domino table, the children in the school, the mothers who gave him johnny-cakes and salted-fish in gratitude. He balanced. Then he decided he could die for that. Each step through the dusty settlement was calculated, priced, and given for the "cause".

by Kwame Dawes

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