

A MOTHER'S SIGH By Susan Bloch

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In a Congolese village, it is dark. Smoke dribbles up and up, blemishing the light from the sickle moon. Thatched roofs have collapsed. Shrapnel pockmarks dot blackened mud walls. There is a smell of blood, charred grasses, and fear.

A groan, a wail, a shriek, and then silence.

Was it only an hour ago that you could hear the rhythmic thumping of mortars mashing cassava in mahogany pestles? The drumbeat announcing that dinner would be ready soon? You could hear women

gossiping, children laughing, and metal spoons clinking in pots.

Now that the militia have left all you can hear is the silence.

Silence more terrifying than the sound of grinding gears as trucks grunt through potholes while they stalk their prey. More terrifying than the soldiers' shouts, the *rat-a-tat-tat* of AK-47s, and machetes hacking through flesh.

Anyone alive?

When the smoke clouds lift, and the night becomes lighter, a cock crows, a goat bleats and tugs on its rope, and a shrike warbles. In the vegetable patch, the tendrils of beanstalks bearing plump pods cling to thin bamboo poles. A plantain tree that has seen more than this one attack bears a scarlet flower the color of blood alongside green clusters of its unripe fruit.

From a thicket of acacia shrubs a baby whimpers. A mother soothes, sighs, and croons a lullaby to the sound of sucking and slow, sleepy breathing.

About the Author:

Susan's stories have won prizes in the Travelers' Tales Solas Awards and received notable mention in Best American Essays 2017. She have been published in a variety of magazines and literary journals, such as *The Forward*, *Entropy*, *The Citron Review*, *STORGY*, *Pif Magazine*, *Tikkun*, and HuffPost. <https://www.susanblochwriter.com/>

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