

Interview with
His Grace Archbishop of Canterbury
ROWAN WILLIAMS
for Herald of Europe

Michael Borshchevsky. What is the moral role of the Church of England in the English-speaking world today?

Rowan Williams. For many centuries of course the Church of England has been very closely linked with the state here, which sometimes has been a problem. We have been too subordinate to the state, but I believe that in the last 200 years the Church of England has become a significant presence, pushing the state towards a more inclusive and more just social provision. The role of the Church in the mid 20th century in assisting the development of the welfare state was quite a significant contribution. I think most of us in the Church of England would still see our role as asking some critical questions about care for the poor or the disadvantaged in society. The importance of our international network — the Anglican Communion — is that increasingly this also gives us some moral base for speaking about development issues, the money that goes towards poorer countries and issues of education and peace-making. Here from Lambeth Palace we have a role in several African countries in dealing not only with the churches, but also with issues of development

and education and trying to raise money for those. So, it is quite a varied picture.

M.B. Anglican Church within the circle of other churches has a reputation of a liberal and progressive one, but any church should be conservative and traditional enough. From this point of view, what are the real possibilities in the future for different branches of Christianity to come together in the realisation of the main task — serving the God and the people?

R.W. I am interested that you should describe the Anglican Church as a liberal and progressive one. I know we have this reputation particularly because of our approach to the ordination of women. At the same time, every Anglican priest and bishop, when they begin their ministry, takes a solemn promise of faithfulness to the Bible and the creeds. What we have in common with Roman Catholic and Orthodox believers is the Scriptures and the creeds of the Early Church and the sacramental practice that we have inherited. I believe that does give us a common language. We are not separated from each other as completely alien communities. That certainly makes

a level of cooperation possible. We believe in the same God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit; we accept the same sacramental structure of the church — the baptism and the Eucharist at the heart of our life. I would say that our cooperation rests on our common acknowledgement that we are made in the image of God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — and that we seek in our work together to honour that image and allow it to flourish in human life and society.

In practice, let me take you again to Africa. In the long years of the tragic civil war in Sudan, the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Southern Sudan worked almost inseparably. They worked along side each other all the time in continuing to provide education, in the efforts of peace-making and reconciliation and are still closely bound together. So in those circumstances of real challenge and testing, we find that the common acknowledgement of the image of God and the duties that come from that will come through.

May I make one more remark about one of the interesting developments that I have found in conversation with the Orthodox Church. Many of the Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe in the last 20 years had to rediscover how to provide chaplaincy for prisons, schools and army. I have had some very constructive conversations about those subjects with priests from Russia and elsewhere, who are seeking to share a little of our experience of chaplaincy and those settings. It is one way in which the Church provides its moral and spiritual contribution to a wider society.

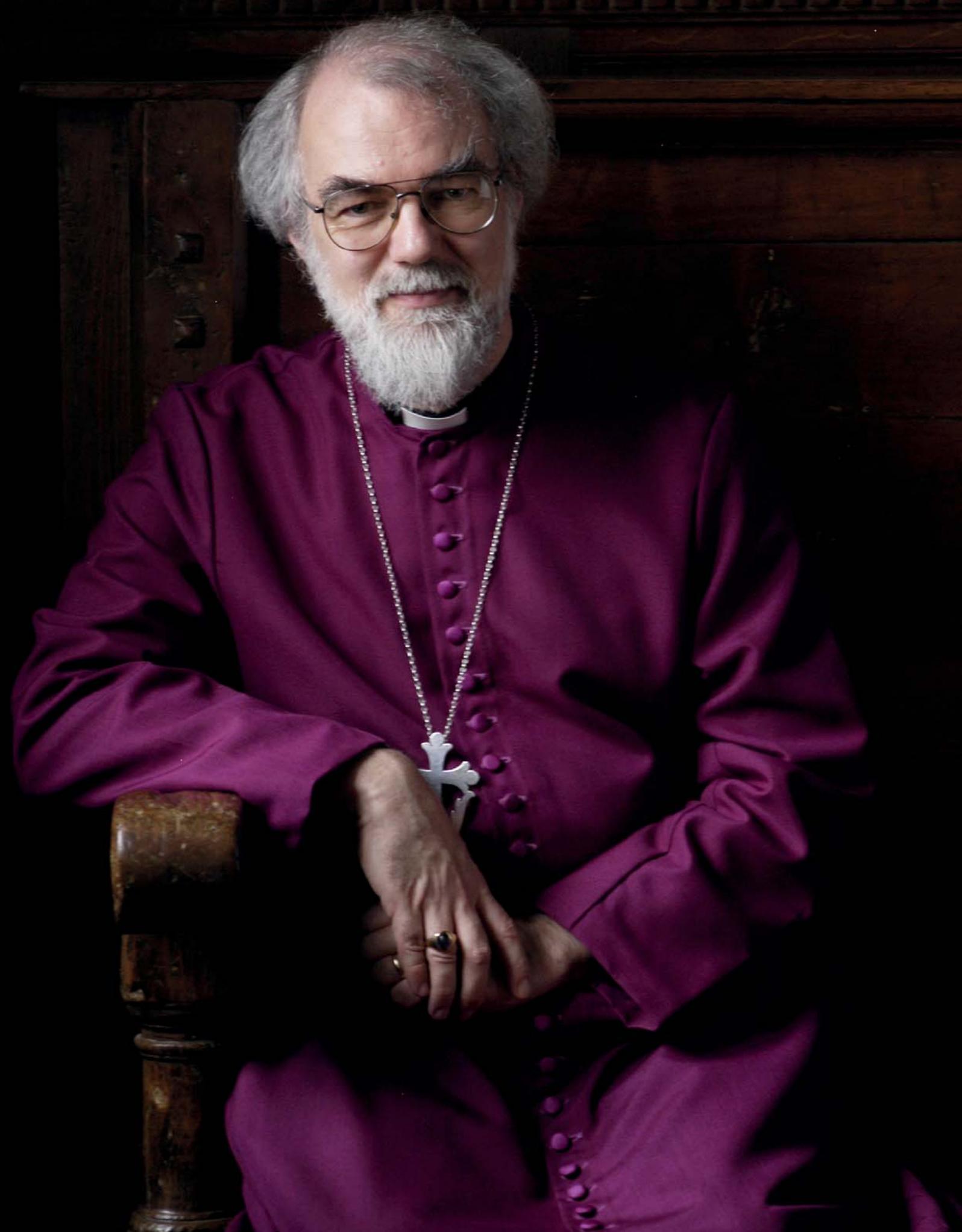
M.B. It is a very important subject you have touched, Your Grace. Of course, army in Great Britain is multinational and it is a long tradition, and army in Russia is also very multinational. When this discussion has been started in the Russian society recently, there were quite contradictory opinions there on how it is possible to combine representatives of different religions in the army. What do you think about that based on the experience of the Church of England in the English Army?

R.W. Well, in the army and indeed in prisons of England we have a very varied population. It has been especially in prison ministry perfectly possible to combine a group of chaplains, who work very closely together, respecting each other's religious

convictions, each being quite free to deal pastorally with members of their own faith. I think that the experience of this team-work has reminded people that being a chaplain, being a pastor, is in fact enriched sometimes by doing it alongside with other people. In Canterbury — my own city — the prison there, which I visit regularly, has a team of chaplains from Jewish, Muslim and Christian backgrounds. The Christian chaplain is the one who convenes the group; and eventually, he had an award recently for inter-faith work because the collaboration has been so fruitful. So, I believe it can be done.

M.B. In your view in the multi-religious situation in Europe is it possible for these religions to come together? What would be the future of Christianity given the demographic situation especially in this country, where Muslim population is rising at a much higher speed and where the problems and contradictions are still very sharp?

R.W. I think there are some people, who rather exaggerate that demographic issue. What tends to happen is that many Muslims coming into this country come from very poor backgrounds — from village backgrounds. And people from backgrounds of that sort naturally have larger families because in situations of poverty you need to have a large family to support the enterprise and it is a tradition of course. As Muslims become more middle-class in our country, the size of their families tends to decrease. As Muslim communities become more integrated in the life of this country and other Western European countries, we probably shall not see a great demographic shift that people sometimes predict, that families will not be so large, that later marriage and fewer children will become more common among Muslims as among non-Muslims. But this is just a guess. At the moment in practise in this country, one of our great challenges is building friendship and trust at the local level, at the street level between Muslim and non-Muslim groups. We often have dialogue between leaders and great sentiments and wonderful ideas flow out between us, but you have to translate it into the experience of people in the towns and in the streets. We have now in this country a Christian-Muslim Forum — a national body, which consists of a number of local dialogue groups for people as we said at grass-roots level, people who want to work together on schools, on community development issues like that. Also this Forum organizes





conferences — week-ends away for local priests and local Muslim leaders, who would go away for 2-3 days together to discuss and explore each other's conviction. At that level we are trying to build some basic understanding and sympathy.

M.B. Unfortunately, I have seen clashes between Muslims and Christians exactly on that every-day level sometimes even without a visual reason. I think it is very important to give people more information about the practice you have just been talking about.

R.W. We do speak about this quite frequently, but unfortunately the Media sometimes prefer stories of conflict. I think that my experience suggests that often clashes are not so much between Muslims and Christians, but between Muslims and people of this country, who have no particular religious knowledge or conviction. Many of our church schools in this country have quite a large number of Muslim students, who learn in that context to live alongside each other, and quite recently I opened a new secondary school (in Lincolnshire, in the east of the country) which had deliberately set out as a church school to be an accepting and welcoming place for local Muslim communities. There I see the relations between young people — Muslims and Christians — as very easy and very natural. I would long to see more of these.

M.B. It is very important that this kind of experience could be spread. What is your reaction to the last tragedy in Nigeria?

R.W. Yes, Nigeria is a very sad story. The vulnerability of Christian communities there is terrible, but also of course a spiral of violence and reaction is set up and it is a very sad situation. Yet, even in Nigeria one of my closest friends there — the Bishop of Kaduna — a very mixed area — who has devoted much of his ministry to reconciliation and still believes it is possible. Unfortunately, in Nigeria after quite long periods where some co-existence was possible, the

external forces, which all over the Muslim world are pushing people towards extremism, have been at work. This sometimes is deepened and sharpened by tribal hostility in Nigeria also. It is a very tragic situation. As we speak, in fact, there is a letter on my desk from the Bishop of Jos in Nigeria, describing the recent events, with whom we keep regularly in touch and seek to do what can be done to encourage the situation.

M.B. What from your point of view is the way to help people there?

R.W. There is no one single solution, but it does matter sometimes as you hinted earlier to share the good experience that we have sometimes in this country, to say in another context — Christians and Muslims do not have to be fighting. I think that depends also on confronting some of the very negative, very destructive styles of Islamic language that come into Nigeria from outside and the Nigerian government has some responsibility there.

M.B. What is your reaction, Your Grace, to the last speech of the Turkish Premier Mr. Erdogan, who considered the decision of the Chamber of Representatives of the American Congress regarding the Armenian Genocide of 1915 to be motivated by Jewish corruption? What do you think about the possibility of such recognition by other countries¹?

R.W. I have never seen how one could deny the name of genocide to what happened at that period. I have visited the museum in Yerevan, I have seen the evidence...

P.B. In your view, Your Grace, can the gulf between religious and non-religious worldview be overcome via social interaction?

R.W. It is often overcome in practice at the level of social interaction, but of course the disagreement is real. The believer holds that he or she is finally answerable, responsible before God, not just before human

¹ At present the fact of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 has been recognized by the following countries: Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Lebanon, Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States (44 of 50 states of the USA that recognize the Armenian Genocide), Uruguay, Vatican City, Venezuela.

(*Herald of Europe*)

beings, which means that religious believer is always someone who is able to give a reason for saying to a tyrannical or unjust state — whatever the power there is against me, the truth demands that I say “no” to these injustices. The history of the 20th century has many extraordinary examples of great figures, who have said “no” in that way. I think here of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred by the Nazis, I think too of Mother Maria Skobtsova in Paris and many more of such. To me the essence of the believer’s calling is the freedom to say “no” to that kind of tyranny that the unbeliever may also say “no” to, but the believers also know why they say “no”.

P.B. Your Grace, nowadays the views are becoming increasingly common that the role of Europe in the world is decreasing. Europe is if not birth-place of Christianity, but certainly a cradle where it flourished. What is your view on this?

R.W. The question of the future of Europe is a very significant one because it cannot be an attempt to make Europe a world power in a simple way. Europe has to find a moral vision, and Europe has a great deal that is positive about it. It is not a commonwealth of states, but it is a *partnership* of states, learning rather slowly to collaborate in matters of economics and some matters of security. I believe that on top of that it needs to have a clear vision of how Europe as a society with deep Christian roots is able because of these Christian roots to be a catalyst elsewhere in the world for justice, economic justice, generosity to those, who are excluded, and not to seek to export their own forms of democracy and impose them, but to hold before other societies a model of participatory adult democracy. I think that Europe has a great future in that respect, but Europe needs to be thoroughly aware of where some of those ideals come from, and I regret very much the way in which sometimes in Europe people want to deny or turn away from that legacy. To say that Europe has a Christian legacy is not to say that non-Christians have no role in Europe - that has never been true.

That is to say this is where the value and the vision come from.

P.B. Responsibility for oneself and responsibility for the truth is possibly akin to responsibility that an individual has to have in a democratic society, where democracy is based upon individual responsibility.

R.W. Indeed, democracy is based on the notion that you can speak for yourself, you take responsibility for your decisions, but also that you take responsibility for your neighbour as well, because a democracy, which is just about the individual alone becomes a consumer society; a democracy, where everybody is aware of responsibility for the neighbour is I would say a Christian democracy.

M.B. A more personal question — why did Dostoevsky become such a close writer to your heart?

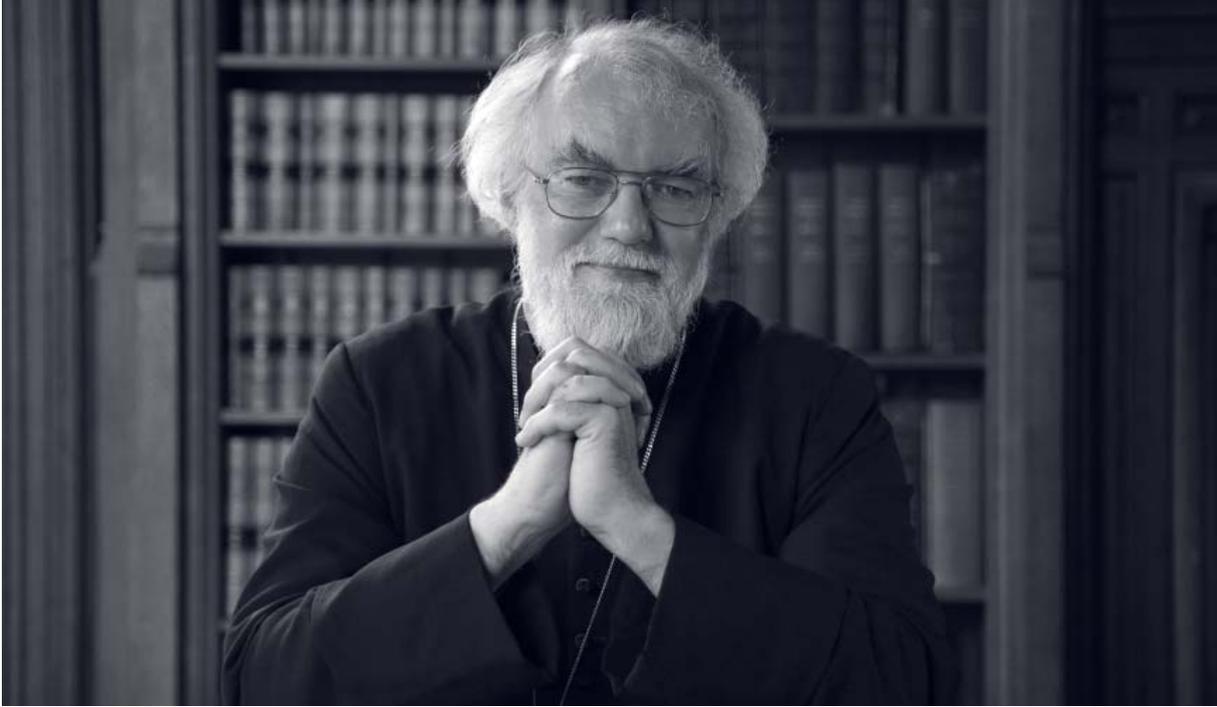
R.W. When I read Dostoyevsky my sense was that here is the writer, whose faith allowed him to look into the very darkest places of human heart and not to turn away. He does not deny or trivialize the agony of human experience and the doubt, and yet he maintains his vision. I think this is the heart of why Dostoyevsky spoke to me when I was a young man and continues to speak to me now.

M.B. Because time is running so speedy, here is the last question from Marcel Proust’s “questionnaire” — when and if you stand before God, what would you ask Him?

R.W. I would ask Him for Mercy. I do not want God to solve any intellectual problems. I can only say — Lord, have mercy!

M.B. Thank you very much, Your Grace, for your time and attention to our questions.

R.W. Thank you. ■



His Grace Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. ROWAN WILLIAMS

DEATH ROW, LUZEERA JAIL¹

What do they spell, the fairy lights
draping the yard outside the cells?
A daily Christmas? Unwrapping the surprises
before dawn? Another day isn't, for everyone,
something to take for granted. But by the time
the sun is up, what is there left
but sitting in the litter? The new Rolex
tells you tomorrow is already planned
(and not by you). Now wake the elders,
who have ten years seniority or twenty here
in this cramped living room; but they
won't help. They have their fill of presents.
They wink back, knowingly, from time to time
at all the little glass bulbs that won't grow
into flowers. But still: on Christmas night
all Christians sing. Guests are received with smiles
and reassured: don't worry, it isn't news
that's welcome here. You needn't tell us
anything but what we know, what the lights spell:
a guest as always, as already, here
as the damp ammoniac floor.

Translated by Nikolay Paltsev

Selected poems

RESURRECTION: BORG SAN SEPOLCRO²

Today it is time. Warm enough, finally,
to ease the lids apart, the wax lips of a breaking bud
defeated by the steady push, hour after hour,
opening to show wet and dark, a tongue exploring,
an eye shrinking against the dawn. Light
like a fishing line draws its catch straight up,
then slackens for a second. The flat foot drops,
the shoulders sag. Here is the world again,
well-known,
the dawn greeted in snoring dreams of a familiar
winter everyone prefers. So the black eyes
fixed half-open, start to search, ravenous,
imperative, they look for pits, for hollows where
their flood can be decanted, look
for rooms ready for commandeering, ready
to be defeated by the push, the green implacable
rising. So he pauses, gathering the strength
in his flat foot, as the perspective buckles under him,

¹ Luzeera Jail is the main prison in Kampala; when I visited it, some of those in the condemned section had been there for up to twenty-three years.

