

HEAVEN IN THE GROUND

Written by Umulkhayr Mohamed and Radha Patel

Layer 1: Topsoil

(Someone places a tape into a recorder)

(The muffled sound of the underground. Someone is digging the ground with a shovel)

(Blow flies humming)

Um: Here lies the collection of flesh and bones of the being who was born Umulkhayr Musse Mohamed and died Arlo Osman. They are becoming one with this tree and the soil that surrounds it.

(Blow flies humming)

Soil be a salve soothing me as my heart has retired, and Roots be a rugged rope that tether me to my task, finding Radha to keep alive in death the work, we committed ourselves too in our last lives.

(High pitched microbiome chanting Huur, Huur, Huur, Huur, Huur and Hoobaale yow heedhe)

Hello ... who's there?

Um's Huur: The same ones who have always been with you, in you, of you. You call us the microbiome, we call ourselves the Huur.

Um: Huur as in the angels of destruction, sent by Waaq, why have you chosen that name ... is it me that you seek to destroy?

Um's Huur: Yes and no, You are our climate, you have kept us warm, now we must return the favour. We are here to hold you in the darkness the way we always have. Though this holding needs to take a different form now, we promise to not let go of your essence, but the rest we need to break down now, one final time, with a wholeness you have not experienced before.

You see, there is no room for borders to be drawn down here in the dirt, and that includes the borders of your cell walls, your skin, ligaments, tendons, muscles and nerves, they all must be torn apart now. That is your first offering, the one where you must give back, to allow us to keep the soil's Huur safe.

Um: But how is it that I'm able to talk to you? And how will this offering keep the soil's Huur safe?

Um's Huur: Your heart beat used to drown out our voices, and since it stopped, and you are dead now, we can finally talk to each other.

And how do you think this tree you have buried yourself with is supposed to grow if you don't give the soil and its own angels what it needs to feed it?

(Distant sound of flies buzzing in the tune of Somali song, Hoobaale yow heedhe)

Um: Wait wait who's that I can hear above ground, they sound like they are singing with you.

Um's Huur: Oh can't you remember, those are the blow flies above ground, they are saying they like the name Huur and maybe want to go by it too.

Um: Haha my grandmother used to say that Somali mathid (you aren't Somali) if you don't let the flies rest on your skin, instead of rushing to swat them away. I know what it is to have your place be mislabelled as the labour you do is seen as beneath others, while knowing that the work you do is what's holding us all together.

I guess dying is having some impact on my memory. I think I knew what you've just shared before, but thank you for reminding me. It is so wonderful to finally get to talk to you all, I think I'd feel empty if I didn't have your voices to replace the space of the rhythm that my heart held. But am I really dead? From what I understood you and I are tethered spirits, one unable to survive without the other, and you are clearly still living off of my body so ... is this not my afterlife that I am living in.

Um's Huur: Yes that's one way of understanding this, and you are right we are not dead, so you still live on through us - we are glad you see us a continuation of each other. But we need to return to our work now, are you ready for us to begin the border breaking?

Um: Hmmm

(Sounds of organs playing start, with crunchy electro glistens)

Huur chant: Bursting, biting, burying, breathing x 22

(Sound of lots of borders busting/exploding)

Um: Yes I hear you now, come Break me down, out, free!

It feels so liberating to be torn apart. The blow flies...the Huur...have marked me with the letter 'P'...don't worry...they whisper 'it stands for passenger not 'punished'...we don't do that here.

If I could cry upon hearing that... my tears would replenish the Earth for a thousand lifetimes. Will I return as the rain? I have always felt so hemmed in by this body, grateful for it as I have learnt to be. This big spirit of mine I know has been a heavy burden for it to carry. Oh what a gift letting my body be free... the bacteria are gathering my flesh into the soil...rolling it into little balls so I can be dispersed across the Earth ...I've wanted for so long to be closer to you all.

Soils Huur: Sounds like another border has been liberated, what's this one's name?

Um's Huur: they go by several but mostly Arlo and Um to friends, which you are!

Soil's Huur: Well thank you friends and welcome back home!

Um: Thank you for welcoming me and setting me free. I see now is my time to give back but can I ask for your help, with one final thing first?

Um's Huur: Ask what you want from your maker/breakers, *Qaali*(Precious).

Um: Can you carry me to Radha please, I miss them, they have been with me at every significant threshold I've crossed before now, and now that I know nothing ends as I hoped. I don't want that to end either, you know we have more to do together than can be contained in one life. I give you all of myself, to that end.

(A gentle bell rings and echoes)

Um: The Huur pull me deeper underground.

Um's Huur: We always guide seekers here, their devotion does what the wind does up above, it reminds us of the pleasure to be found in being swept up in something unseeable, but real as anything.

Um: Uhh (sign of relief) and where will I find them?

Um's Huur: Oh that's simple the answer is the same as a line in an old qawali song you loved.

(Qawaali plays: Let's celebrate! The lotus is raining; the sky is drenched! The lotus is raining; the sky is drenched! Oh seekers, let's sing in celebration!')

Um: I understand now, to find them I must dig deep to search for joy. The Huur's love is patient, there is no need to rush.

Um's Huur: Down is up here, so let us rise to the depths, once we exchange with you here, we'll pass you onto the mites, maggots and worms, and beetles to go lower still, and then darker still where you'll rejoin the ancestors and finally to the great connector the Bedrock herself! This journey is a long one but we can carry you all the way.

Um's Huur sing: *All creation, every nation, Has its being by our work. As we destroy, we make here heaven. We maintain this Earth. We maintain this Earth. Hallowed be our name. Hallowed be our name.*

(Sounds of digging and shovelling)

Radha: The Canwyllau Cyrff have arrived. Have they come to take me to Annwn? They do not burst into flames. My body does not burn. For now, I am still a warm home for the history of my life. Just this morning, I had asked my ancestors to bring me love and now the Sky is still. The Earth is shaking, my boat is rocking but voices are rising up from the ground to steady me.

The first lie is unravelling; death is not lonely after all...

Song Plays: *(If you love, then you must love like the cotton that clothes you. If you love, then you must love like the cotton that clothes you. The cotton that covers you in life, becomes your shroud in death. Welcome to my country! Welcome to my country! Welcome to my country! Welcome to my country! Oh my dear, my beloved – come! Come to my country! Oh my dear, come to my country!)*

Radha: The whole world is here to greet me.

In my dreams Farida is singing 'Aaj jaane ki zid na karo / Don't make plans to leave today...'. The trees circulate their breath through my lungs, and every living being that I have touched - every Being that has touched me offers one final note 'Aaj Jaane Ki Zid Na Karo... Jaan jaati hai jab uñh ke jaate ho tum / Don't make plans to leave today...When you leave, life goes out of me'.

I'll be back soon, I tell them, I'll be back soon...but first I have to find my friend. Um is here in the ground too, I can sense it. The mitochondrial network has become the mycorrhizal network.

My last breath is a sigh of relief, and so was theirs.

Funny how we've never been that far apart.

(Sounds of digging and shoveling)

Radha: In the dark, someone is digging.

Bacteria: Do you want to be broken?

Radha: Yes. But, can I be reincarnated if I wasn't cremated? Will I be able to find my ancestors if I take a different path? Will I be able to find my friend?

Bacteria: * Whispers* "We have always lived inside you - as you. There are a thousand ways for the body to be dispersed but we all return to the surface...and each time there is another chance to live your life over and over again as each of us. Who will you choose to be?

Bacteria: Are you ready to be broken?

Radha: Yes. Will it be gentle?

Bacteria: No, it's going to hurt *real* bad but you won't feel a thing.

(Sounds of biting, Sounds of digging)

Radha: In the dark, someone is biting, someone is digging...stitch by stitch, seam by seam...the Earth and me are becoming undone.

To the ground I give my bones, my toes, my eyes, my flesh...carbon and nitrogen as an offering of gratitude in return for my life above...my memories in magnesium, blood and marrow. All my fears turn to dust.

In the name of the 100 million - I give myself to the ground. In the name of the billion, of the trillion, of the gazillion, of the smallest one - in the name of every Being that has lived, and died...in the name of those who were taken before the flesh of their fruit was ripe enough to turn the Earth's music into song - I plant myself as a seed, and as the seed becomes the soil, I dip myself in the colour of love and it cradles me.

Isn't that what we always wanted? For the Earth to turn into our hands and hold us?

(Sounds of the Earth humming, echoing, buzzing, vibrating, ringing, glitching)

Layer 2: The Subsoil

Um: Did you ever think that Jannah could be found right here? Did you ever think that Jannah could be found right here? In this...Dun Du ya ya, Dun Dun ya ya. Dun Dun ya ya. I know now there is blessing in the material. It's not just the immaterial that is capable of holding the holy.

(Sound of an electric echo)

Mites and maggots and worms: Nice to meet you, we are the Ayaanle.

Um: Ayaanle? Ma famikaro. (I can't understand it). Dhulkan waa Welsh, sidee ku dhici kartaa inna magacaagu Soomaali yahay (This land is Welsh, how can it be that your names are Somali?)

Ayaanle: Waxaan isku naqaannaa ayaanle sababtoo ah waxaan nahay Ruuxa Wanaagsan ee Xambaarsan Nicmada Waaq, Gaadhsiiya Nimcada. (We call ourselves Ayaanle because we are the Good spirits that carry Waaq's favour, the conveyors of blessings).

Iyo abayo ma tihid somaliyad ugu horaysay ee dhulkan welshku haysto. (And beloved you are not the first somali this welsh soil has held).

Those were some old seamen a hundred and fifty years ago, we know you haven't forgotten them. And as we were gifted their bodies to hold, we found in their hearts their stories of the afterworld. Not just the most recent stories, which was a return to Allah, but also these older stories pre-Islamic stories. Those older stories we found were sitting there quietly in the ventricles of their hearts, we believe waiting at these thresholds hoping to be let back in again.

Um: The way all old storybooks do, sitting and waiting patiently to be read...

Ayaanle: Yes! And we see it in the degrading fibres of your being, you answered the call of those old stories.

We decided long ago to always name ourselves in honour of what we find in the hearts of beings we consume, so you can recognise this crossing over for what it is, a homecoming.

Um: Oh, I think I figured that out some time ago, back when I was a young poet curling words into a string of sounds capable of speaking back to dead poets, like Hadrawi, and how that conversation helped me accept that no matter what land you find yourself on, you can call it home. If you tell the land your stories, I learnt it always offers to hold them for you. You know I think answering those stories is one of the things I'm most proud of doing in my life, not that it was my doing really, in so much as it was my receiving.

(Sounds of a radio being dialed between stations)

Um: I want to tell you how that came to be, even though I know you are already coming into an awareness of it as we are becoming one.

Ayaanle: We like to think of it more as a returning to being one, rather than a becoming one, but of course abaayo, noo shaag (tell us, beloved).

Um: They came to me at an opening that I had almost confused for my ending. It started with a lifelong spell being broken on an unceremonious Tuesday in October, on a short call that wiped all the remaining holy from my eyes, and left me with nothing but a version of myself that had to be held together at the seams by Kieran.

Not long after that I went to visit a coven of trees that my friend Farah introduced me to, I think in search of some magic to replace the holiness I lost, and that's just what I found. Energies, and spirits of the trees, and the surrounding flowers and bushes greeted me, for what felt like the first time. Although of course it wasn't, it was just the first time I was paying enough attention to them to hear them, that's when I learnt that deaths, real and symbolic, are lives too.

(Subtle sounds of things growing)

Um: I followed a feeling back, that was telling me that this had been there all along, hiding in the quiet openings of myself, what I found there was the voices of my ancestors. Who I could finally hear, no longer drowned out by a god that was built to break me down, and their eyes provided sunlight for the moons of my eyes to reflect back.

Their light made it clear to me, what that feeling was navigating me back to, a long lineage, an inheritance of countless beads of connection with the earth around me, and all that lives in it. And how it's all there for me to touch, hold, feel, so long as I remember to remain open to it, and not let myself be worn down by the choir of alienation that sing their hate-filled hymns on the 24 hour news cycle.

I didn't always remember not to be worn down of course, we are all dying things, and so corrosion is a thing we can only fight off when we have the right stuff to keep ourselves safe with, but I did remember as much as I could.

Ayaanle: Sometimes a truth is so all encompassing that you can lose sight of it, your brain forgetting to thank the air that, in its absence, it would cease to be able to think other thoughts without.

Um: Haha yes... to be softened and nourished by a land you weren't made for, is a particular experience that not everyone gets to feel the gift of. And even fewer are able to relax into this gift enough to be set at ease by it, that is a daily practice, and one that is much easier now I'm subsumed by this foreign land I've made my home in.

Ayaanle: Speaking of daily practices, we should return to ours, we have a full head of your hair to make light work of. And what a head of hair it is! The shape of each strand provides its own bouncy rhythm to the work of breaking it down, together making a song only we can decipher.

(A bouncing strum begins to build. Eggs hatch)

Um: Wait are you saying, our hair is your music? You don't mean that literally, or do you? I just want to make sure I understand you.

Ayaanle: Yes! Our music and our dance, each head of hair holds its own song, as well as a feast for us, your curls taste like the colour yellow and sound like a wide knowing smile, thank you for sharing this with us. You are a blessing, we bless the soil with you.

(The bouncing strum continues to play)

Radha: My eyes have become the sun. I am gifted a final glance of the world that now stands above me, and as I look down from the sky I can see that a joyous festival is taking place.

Underground, I can hear it, feel it. Above me, around me, inside me - life dances.

Inside me, the carrion beetles are making love to one another. Even in death, my body is a source of eternal pleasure. It is both a mirror and a field, as Sulochana said.

New larvae are being born. 'Let's eat' they say to one another 'Here, take this...this is for you'

(The larvae crunch and eat)

I am the feast. One by one they unpick my skin, and this is how the world is formed. They make Great Caverns to wander and walk and get to the heart of my flesh. If they are to be nourished, I must let go. In this world where one body is untied to make another, I must allow for something else to be born of my death. I have spent my life receiving the world's love, and now it is time for the world to receive mine.

(Sounds of digging and biting)

What a wonderful time to be a creature alive.

Dada is digging, building a railway.

sounds of digging, shovelling

Dada: Chal chal, mar ek vhat che thar hatar. Chal, mar ek kam che. Chal, oo thane kasu bhataou? (Come, come. I have something to tell you. Come, I have a job for you. Come on then, let me show you something?)

Radha: Something to show me, something to say, something...that I need to do.

It's time for me to join them in Paradise. I know - I'll look for Um on the way and we can find our ancestors together, as they once found each other in us.

(Sounds of a train arriving)

And just like that - no hands, no feet, yet I can move about so freely.

Underground guide: All aboard.

(Sounds of the train moving slowing down)

(Sounds of a belt buckling)

Radha: Outside the carriage, a large group of white insects with red ears are sucking on the blood of a stag, then the stag becomes a crocodile, then the crocodile becomes a snake, then the snake becomes a goat.

Underground guide: Which path would you like to take?

Radha: Oh...um...I'm not sure...uhh...

Underground guide: Don't think about it too much, whatever path you choose, you'll be alright.

Radha: But...what if I (whispers)...what if I end up on another floor?

Underground guide: Impossible - there's only one.

Radha: Just one floor?!

Underground guide: Yes, just one, with many paths to choose from.

The train comes to a halt. Radha climbs out and walks.

Underground guide: Have you decided?

Radha: Yes - This one - I'm going this way.

Underground guide: You're very welcome. Here, this is for you.

Radha: Shiro? Doodh? (A Gujarati dessert? Milk?)

Underground guide: Someone left it for you on the surface, for the journey ahead.

Radha: And you brought it to me...thank you so much.

Underground guide: You're very welcome. Go explore, be curious, have faith.

(Sound of Radha walking away)

Radha: At the entrance to the Great and Gentle Cavern of my choosing, a light flickers above me revealing a sign.

'Do not abandon hope, all ye who enter here'

It seems that my search for love has come to halt, because it is all around me.

Just one floor. Another lie is unravelling. There is no such thing as hell.

(Sound of an electric, underground disco which fades into the echoes of Qawwali, clapping, harmonium)

Um: I never cared about staying the same, so this new state of being, where the ground and you - its inhabitants - are pulling me deeper down, into your mouths, suits me just fine, but this conversation is reminding me that there is something I miss from my old life.

Ayaanle: What is it?

Um: I really miss dancing, I really do. I used to think it was because it's when I felt the most alive, when I was dancing with my whole soul. But now that life and liveness is becoming a hazy figure in the distance, it features something that resembles more of an amorphous feeling than anything I can describe... I think it wasn't about feeling alive at all, it was about that feeling of dropping down into myself.

Yes, dropping down, that made me feel closer to the earth, and all of you in it, my feet calling to the ground with each step, seeking you out, calling you to bounce in step with me. To spend my afterlife talking to you, is a gift I'll never be able to repay.

Ayaanle: You say that as if you are not a gift yourself, which we know you know you are, Arlo.

Um: Are you referring to my chosen name?

Ayaanle: Yes, and your given name, can you tell us the story of those too? Your Huur mentioned you gave a beautiful speech explaining how you came into that understanding.

Um: Of course, my given name at birth, Umulkhayr, means mother of good fortune, and my chosen name Arlo, means gift. I decided to still go by Umulkhayr because I didn't want that name to be cast in secrecy, Umulkhayr carried me far and she remains present in all her versions just behind my eyes, the baby girl unsure of the world but smiling at it, the 8-year-old burdened beyond her years but beautiful. The 14-year-old making very suspect fashion choices but with a boldness you couldn't not respect, the 20-year-old sharing her last moments with her beloved grandfather - the first person she felt unconditionally loved by. The 26-year-old meeting new friends and partners that they would go onto build a whole, pleasure and care filled life with. The 30, 40, 50-year-old beginning anew again, holding their past selves and all the ones that made them be who they are, closer to themselves than their jugular vein.

And many more versions. I wanted to have multiple names so I could free Umulkhayr from having to bring forth any good fortune for others, an expectation that became a burden over time. The name Arlo came to me at another threshold in my life, that Radha was also there for. It felt fitting to take it on, to mark the sacrificing of an old life so I could make way for a new one, one where I understood myself to be the good fortune, the gift itself rather than the one that brings it into being through the painful process of birthing. I chose the name Arlo to help me show up as the gift I was in that life and this one. I used to take a breath each time I was called that name and use that as an affirmation of my, I mean our inherent value. Who knew that would be relevant in my afterlife too.

Ayaanle: We did Qali (Precious)

Um: You probably also know then that my relationship with the idea of being consumed in my old life was that it felt so violent. I think because it often happened by force when I was younger, it wasn't until I found people I wanted to give parts of myself to freely and that I could trust to cherish those parts even when the rest of me wasn't looking on. When I began to find pleasure in it, and you are amongst the people I can trust, that much is clearer for me to see than even before now, even as I have lost my eyes.

Ayaanle: Names carry such weight. It's like we said earlier, we decided long ago to support your kind in this transition by weaving in some familiarity in how we introduce ourselves to you, because this dirt is your home now, though we appreciate it is very different from the homes you have known before.

(Qawaali plays: I no longer count prayer beads nor do I chant - Ram chants my name! Ram chants my name! Ram chants my name and now I'm at peace)

Ayaanle: It's part of the promise we make in exchange for sustaining ourselves with what's left of you, to cherish the aftertaste of the life you lived above. We can taste you all now, all the flavours of your many iterations blending together in our mouths.

Um: I'm so glad, I'm afraid to ask but this does make me think, do you ever come into contact with humans who refuse to speak to you, as you don't align with their vision of heaven?

Ayaanle: Yes, we call them the deniers, they cause us *great* sadness as it creates such discordance that we can take on, when it comes to breaking them down, it leaves us with the most bitter taste, the way all things that aren't given freely do.

Um: That must be so painful for them to continue to deny your personhood, even when it's as clear as their own. I'm so glad I didn't become one of them, I really have Radha to thank for that, they helped me return to an acknowledgement of the understanding of divinity that was there before I was fed any particular faith.

Ayaanle: And what was that Arlo?

Um: That divinity is an endless shroud that cuddles all of existence, each faith tradition making up just some of the threads, they may be distinct in the colours and textures they lend to the whole, but they are all part of the same shroud in the end, meant to keep us warm, but can also be suffocating when wrapped too tightly.

Ayaanle: Indeed!

(Sound of clapping, harmonium and tabla)

Radha: I've arrived at the home of the Carrion Beetles. If you were to search for me, you would not be able to find me. But if you were to call out for me with your human voice, I could try and return an echo of what you said with my own - for it's the last thing I have left.

The Beetles are busy separating their finds, eating, feeding and fu-

I try to catch someone's attention as they pass me by.

Hello?

No answer

Excuse me? Excuse me, hi there I'm looking for -

Beetle: Oh great, you're here - just in time - those eggs are about to hatch, help me fish them out of that carcass and feed them, would you?

Radha: Oh no, sorry. I think you've mistaken me for someone else. I'm looking for Paradise?' I was wondering if you could tell me how to get there?'

Beetle: What do you mean you're looking for Paradise?

Radha: Oh, well...I was told that I would find my ancestors in Paradise. I'm also looking for my best friend. It's my duty - last mission and then I get to relax before heading up there to be human again...woo...

Beetle: Oh no, not another one.

(Other Beetles burst out laughing)

Beetle: We have to fix the communication issues up there. Hey! Stop laughing at them!

(Everyone stops laughing)

Beetle: Oh! It's you! You *are* new here, aren't you? My dear, you don't need to look for Paradise...because...you're already here - this is Paradise.

Radha: This is Paradise? How can this be Paradise, you're all working?!

Beetle: *Sigh* There you humans go again, questioning everything that's right in front of you...questioning our intelligence...the human supremacy never ends...even when you're dead.

Radha: Ahhh come back, I'm sorry. You shouldn't have to explain yourselves. Let's start over, please?

Radha: Tell me about you. You know all about humans, right?

Beetle: You're impossible to ignore

Beetle: We've learnt a few things watching you up there, assisting you on your travels down here...growing inside of you...

Radha: You're the same Beings who hatched in me?

Beetle: Funny how we're all strangers to what's inside us...isn't it? Come this way, let us show you who we are. It takes a lot of work to hold a soul like that, you know?

Radha: In a dugout courtyard, lined with stones and precious metals...a Carrion Beetle pulls in a large bird from a cavern on the opposite side to us and lays it centre stage. They're almost out of breath. They lay their mandibles on their thorax to steady themselves and take deep breaths.

Almost immediately, some Beetles gather around to check on them...and others to separate the bird's flesh and its bones and its feathers.

The Beetle rests. They're doing okay.

Beetle: It's usually pretty easy to do this bit by yourself, but the bird is bigger than usual and they needed help. Once it's ready, we'll all share and eat. You know something that disheartens me about humans, Radha? That you would look upon our world and not see the Paradise that lives beneath your feet, that has been in front of you all this time. It is strange to look upon our world with pity, and even more so to look down at us in awe and *ask 'who could have dreamt up such beauty'* - well, us of course!

Paradise is not a metaphor, it's the reality of our making...and we make it for each other. This is our work. What's the matter? You look so disheartened.

Radha: I just thought, that if I didn't live through the end of Capitalism...Racism...Ableism...you know...if I didn't see the end of everything that everyone had worked so hard for on the surface...that maybe...at least I could find it here...and I have. But...it's so different to what I thought it was going to be like...our whole lives we're taught that Paradise is about relaxing ...but what if Paradise is meant to teach us that everything can go right? We are always looking up to find the answer...but we're not meant to let go of the world above...we're supposed to hold on to it tightly and return to the surface with what we've witnessed below...bring the souls of our feet to the sky and back.

Beetle: You see it now! Oh, I'm so happy! There is an old saying amongst us Carrion Beetles...passed to us from our ancestors: *"The soil doesn't hold itself in place. A beetle is given its breath by the ancient wind. A human is given bricks to make their home. The bricks are made of dust and in the dust is all of us"*

We are the makers of our dream come true; we do not wait for them to tell us what they mean!

Radha: I guess...my only question now is...how do I do that?!

Beetle: Oh, don't worry. You'll have plenty of time to figure that out when you're an ant.

Radha: An ant?! I'm returning as an ant?!!

(Sounds of radio stations tuning in and out of each other, voices and songs overlapping)

Layer 3: Parent Material

(Radha humming the tune of Sakal Ban)

Radha: I have arrived at the Paradise of the White Ants - that is where the Beetles have sent me. I'll soon be back here, as one of them.

The word 'Paradise' still weighs heavily in my mind, but for now I have been taken by the sound of this sovereign colony and I can't resist it. Just like the city, it is bursting - literally bursting - with life, and death is not far behind.

Ant Guide: Hello Radha

Radha: Oh, hello, I'm sorry I didn't see you there.

Ant Guide: I'm so glad you made it to us, I can understand it may be a shock learning of your fate in this way. It's not custom for Beings to be told of their next lives...sometimes...word slips through the cracks...or through the Beetles...but I want to reassure you that the Bedrock has made the right decision; and we are honoured to welcome you to our Paradise.

Radha: Thank you, I feel a little better knowing there'll be at least one familiar face.

Ant Guide: Oh - you won't remember who I am when you finally become an ant. In fact, you won't remember anything you've seen here, but you will be able to feel everything. As you travel to the Bedrock, you'll find that not everything you feel is bound to your skin. You're looking for your best friend, is that right?

Radha: Yes, that's right I'm looking for Um.

Ant Guide: Um...Um...Um...they go by many names don't they? Excellent, this means that life is abundant within them. I can taste them all in the air. I might have an idea of where you can find them, but first - I want to show you the Paradise you'll soon belong to. Come along Radha.

Um: The Ayaanle leave me at the entrance of a colony of ants, they tell me that I must enter alone and that I'll find my next guide in there, so we say our goodbyes, and I float in. Immediately I'm drawn to a corner that seems to be particularly bustling, staring a little while longer. I begin to make out a rectangle shaped thing with two small circles in the centre that the ants are frantically burying with soil.

Is that an old cassette tape? I find myself shouting to the crowd, who mostly ignore me.

Why are you burying that? What's that even doing her-

Ant Guide #2: Do you always start with so many questions and no greetings, surely you were taught better than that?

Um: I snap out of the interrogation I had launched into, just to realise that I was feeling quite dizzy, as I feel myself sinking the ant rushes towards me to see if I'm okay. I lose consciousness for a moment but then I come too and find myself having to look up to see the ant's face, which must mean I am now smaller than an ant. I've shrunk, that got to be the only explanation for me having to look up to stare into this ant's face. I've got no hands and no feet, but somehow I'm moving freely.

But wait there was something about this ant, a sense of familiarity that I was able to distinguish now I was paying attention again, had we met before? No, it felt like more than just that.

Um: I'm sorry do, I know you, something in me is telling me that you are or maybe were someone significant to me?

Ant Guide #2: We ants are carriers of a collective consciousness greater than any one of us, but connected to us all. We hold the ancestors' life force in that consciousness and they can if roused with memory come to the surface from time to time. We each have our own collection of ancestors we are tasked with holding, so perhaps I hold one of yours.

Um: Maybe that is what I'm sensing! How can I check though?

Ant Guide #2: It just takes you sharing a memory of that person, and if I carry that person's life force they will come to the forefront.

Um: I know just the memory to share! Ahh - It's an average-hot day in Hargeisa between 28 and 30 degrees celsius. I've just stepped out of the car that had brought me from the airport, wearing a black abaya that has somehow already gotten the bottom third covered in dust from the road. I'm pushing open the light green metal gate, and stepping into the gravel filled garden that sits in front of the bungalow house with the marble lined porch.

I meet this person's eyes, as he walks out of the shadow of the porch, and as he does I see he's crying and I think I knew he'd be happy to see me, I just wasn't expecting this, also he's taller than I remember, and older too, but before I can say anything my grandmother asks him why he's crying.

I look up at the ant to see if it worked and ask. Awoowo ma idegaba? / Grandad is that you?

(Instrumental of Nafta Haboon plays)

Just as I asked that question the ant twitched its head a bit, before stretching out its back to stand slightly taller. Something drew me to take in the ant's thousand tiny interconnected eyes, and in that moment they all clouded over at once. I knew it had worked when that happened, no explanation needed, we just stared at each other in confirmation of what we both understood to be true.

When I stopped believing in heaven there was a grieving process, but maybe not the kind you'd expect, I didn't grieve the loss of an eternal life, an image of never-ending utopia. It was never my utopia anyway, even when I did believe, I never agreed with who did and didn't meet its admissions criteria.

No the only thing I really grieved was not being able to see my Awoowo again, and getting to make up for all of the years together that we were robbed of in my life, because I didn't get to grow up with him and instead for most of the time we shared this earth we were over 6000 miles apart, because of a migration that can be traced back to colonialism, like countless others.

I imagined all the conversations we would have once we returned to each other, but now that I was here it was so clear that there was nothing more that needed to be said that hadn't already. What was left was to reclaim the time we were always meant to have together, to feel together, so we did that in silence. We sat, ate, played, rested together for a lifetime here in the Paradise of the White Ants, or whatever the equivalent of a lifetime is down here.

(Nafta Haboon continues to plays)

Ant Guide: Look down there. Many ants have died today. Can you see what the others are doing?

Radha: Let me see...are they LICKING THE DEAD?!?!

Ant Guide: Yes - humans don't believe that ants can grieve but there is a saying in our underground cultures that goes '*you must not be afraid to taste your own sorrow*'. It reminds us to grieve and we are encouraged to do so...for everyone. Many humans only grieve for those you are closest to, those whom you see yourselves in. A scientist could spend their whole life searching for a teary ant, but you will never find one because you don't know how to look beyond yourselves. Sorry, you could say that *my* sorrow tastes bitter today, but I'll try not to let it get the best of me.

Radha: It's alright. I want to understand you more.

Ant Guide: Do you see how each one is broken and pulled apart but never pushed aside? In our world, no one is disposable, no one is disregarded. I want to assure you that you'll be safe with us.

Down here, when we untie a body to help release the soul, when we bite and break, these same repetitions tie us to one another like magic...it couldn't work any other way. Being an ant is great. No one here is encouraged to cut the other's throat, or step in and inherit the spoil.

For an ant - to tie your death with my life, is to tie your liberation with my duty.

Are you alright?

Radha: Yes. Sorry. I am just...another lie is unravelling, you know? The world is getting lighter and lighter...because we disregard the weight of other species - their intentions, their feelings, their dedication to our Planet - their power. Not everything we feel is bound to *our* skin. The world is suffering a great imbalance because we have forgotten this.

Ant Guide: Because you have allowed yourselves to believe it.

Radha: They're moving the bodies...where are they going?

Ant Guide: To the ant cemetery - to be buried. Let's walk over there, I'd like for you to get a better look.

(Sakal Ban begins to play)

Can you hear that? Can you hear the music?

All underground Beings are born to a call from the Bedrock. A love song, a gift from the Earth to all of us - to welcome us back to life. All love songs originated in this way, as an echo and a call between us and the Earth. The flesh of the fruit you eat is filled with this music, when you bite, you receive - when you sing - the Planet hears you.

Underground, we play many of these melodies at funerals for each other - the Bedrock tells us that if we send away our siblings with a song, they will find it easier to return to us.

Radha: **sings Sakal Ban quietly** That song has been stuck in my head all this time, you sent it to me, didn't you? This isn't my first time being an ant, is it?

Ant Guide: We really wanted you to return to us, but it wasn't in our control. All I can say to you is that, like anyone who passes by our Paradise, like any ant who chooses to call it home, you are a gift from the Bedrock.

Radha: Everything makes so much sense now. You know, when I first started travelling through these underground caverns, I thought to myself...I wish I had a light...I wish I could hold a torch in my hand to see where I was going...but I couldn't. So, I just had to trust the path in front of me. I think so many of us are scared to die because it's the one thing we can't control. We're so desperate to shine a light on everything we don't know, to keep digging until we get to the

bottom of every mystery, but we have to trust that the Earth has our best interests at heart...as it always has done. It's always given us air to breathe, it's always given us food to eat, colour and sounds and smells to bathe ourselves in. This is the Earth's love, and it doesn't end...even when we're dead.

Take these graves for example, each of them reminds me of how Mami would take out a book and write 'Ram, Ram, Ram' in these tiny little boxes...a thousand times over...a written chant for her favourite God. It seems to me that here, the real creator of the universe has no problem giving up their place for even the smallest creature.

Ant Guide: Not only do they give up their place, but if you look closely...Do you see the mustard flower seedling in each grave? Each one is planted by the creator, and if you listen carefully enough - you can hear the creator chanting the name of each ant as it sprouts and blooms.

(Sakal Ban Plays)

Ant Guide: Here, take this!

Radha: A shovel? It's so heavy.

Ant Guide: There is a saying amongst many of our underworld cultures Radha, 'you become the children of those you bury' and to bury a fellow ant - Radha - is amongst our greatest honours. Would you like to...

Radha: I really would.

(Walks over and starts digging)

Ant Guide: We sing these lines as we dig.

(Qawaali begins to play: "Humse Tumko Sai Crore Aur Tumsa Humko Ek / You may find 100s like me, but there is only one of you")

Ant Guide: There's one last thing I need to show you, before you go.

Radha: These walls...these walls are so intricately lined with wood and paper. What's this writing?

Ant Guide: Breathtaking, isn't it? We've given birth on the diary entries of Edward Hamilton Aikten for over 100 years. Our ancestors ate through the British Empire and lined these walls with wood and paper to keep everyone warm...administrative papers with important messages, steam ships we didn't want to take off. Each new generation of termites that is born here writes over what was written with their deepest desires.

Some humans who have travelled here say that they see the poetry in what was done, but in their eyes - it didn't achieve much.

Radha: And what do you say to them?

Ant Guide: I tell them that, just like how your human ancestors...Baba Bulleh Shah...and Mirabai...saw God in everyone...we termites are no different. My ancestors saw their colonisers in yours.

They couldn't bear the suffering that was happening all around them...to your species and to ours...and so they also organised themselves.

Most importantly, we wanted to remind you humans that you're not alone. The whole world belongs to us all, you know? When we die the line that connects the Earth and the Sky becomes a circle; we all feed the soil that feeds us, we all return to this sacred place. I untie your body to make it mine.

The ground is sacred because the thoughts of every living Being on Earth are born here. The burden of what has become of this world does not rest on everyone's shoulders, but the fight is born at our feet and is ours to share. And, as we know, that which is born at our feet - *those* who are born at our feet are the most sacred of all.

Radha: I really understand it all now. I was always told that reincarnation was about karma, and karma was about how well you behaved. It was so fixed, so loud, and Being human - returning as a human - was the ultimate marker of just how well you behaved. I think a part of me still thought of being an ant as a punishment, even though this world...this Underworld is far from resentful.

I resented being an ant for a little while, because I thought the only way I could make a great change to this Planet was as a human...but it's not always about us... we disregard the weight of other species - your intentions, your feelings, your care, your duty, your power. We have no control over who we'll become, but to live is a gift from the Bedrock and we must mold and mend a great, great life out of it.

Thank you for reminding me that to show gratitude for my life and for the lives of others, I must not hold on to it so tightly; I must learn to let go. With each death, there is so much to learn.

And no one ever dies just once.

(Instrumental of Nafta Haboon plays)

Ant Guide #2: In the great delusion humans forgot many things, but some memories still remain. One of those being that the soil is a safe place to hide precious things, because we the creatures of the soil will always keep things safe.

Um: Just like how we bury precious memories in the dark soil of our spirits, because our lives are too long for us to be able to hold all that we care about in our palms, especially since we only have two hands to do everything with.

Ant: speaking of which, we must return to burying you now.

Um: I understand, can I just have a moment more to sit and watch you work before you begin burying me, so I can bury the memory of this place firmly inside myself first. I know I want to keep what I have seen and learnt here safe.

Before I am buried deeper still, I climb a small pile of rocks at the edge of the colony, sit and stare at the world as it moves all around me. Someone offers me a drink. I am intoxicated by their movements, their calculations and care.

I can't help but see my ancestors in everyone.

Layer 4: Bedrock

Huur: We have taken you as far as we can, the final steps are yours to take!

Um: Thank you for carrying me this far! I can feel my sense of self slipping away, for a thing I spent my whole life above ground building I'm surprised at how pleasurable it feels, what's happening.

Huur: You are almost done being returned to the source, the bedrock is calling you to come home-

Um: and that's where Radha is going too?

Huur: Turn around, they are right there, beside you

Radha: Oh, there you are! I have so much to tell you!

Um: Me too, but let's finish what we started first!

Radha: Yes, I agree, there will be plenty of time to catch up on the other side.

Bedrock: State your purpose

Radha and Um: We have come seeking the gift of madness.

Bedrock: You wish to return to the surface?

Radha and Um: We do.

Bedrock: And what do you reject in the name of this great gift?

Radha and Um: We reject heaven. Instead, we will give ourselves to the ground, and in giving ourselves to the ground we will return to ourselves - and to each other - to every ancestor - again and again and again.

Bedrock: In whose name do you wish to return?

Radha and Um: We choose justice in the name of the birds, the trees, the fungi, the rocks, the ants, the flies, the dirt, the dust and all creatures big and small.

Bedrock: And what do you surrender in return for this gift?

Radha and Um: We surrender the warm histories of our lives. We know that you are the great beholder of all memories on Earth and a place long, long before that. We know that you cannot see underground, and that we have been created to be your witnesses on Earth – and when we return to you, we hold the history of the world inside us. This is our sustenance, and yours too, we are one in the same, our dust the same stone.

Bedrock: Will you carry the message of the underground with you?

Radha and Um: We will. We will return to Earth with this message: to be alive is to know our ancestors, to die is to become them. To be alive is to hear the birds, to die is to understand their message. We belong to the most sacred of circles, and the most sacred of circles belongs to us.

Bedrock: Very well. And if you forget, simply lay your hands on the ground and ask to be reminded. Do you have any final words?

Radha: When I die, I hope that Aiman continues to write me letters. I hope that the Crows continue to deliver their messages to the Underworld, and I hope that the Underworld lives forever.

Um: I will not say Ameen. I will not unbless this sacred place. Instead I say 'thank you', thank you, thank you for all that I am about to receive.

Radha: My last breath is a sigh of relief and then it becomes the wind. My eyes become the sun.

Um: The world is breaking but the ground holds on.

Radha: I have spent my life trying to make my heart a Planet, and now the Planet becomes my heart.

Radha and Um: Take us back to Earth, there's work to be done and songs to be sung and we will find our own paradise in the breaths in between.

Bedrock: May you be reborn again and again to forever enjoy the wisdom of youth. Here, take this - drink this.

Radha and Um: Alcohol?!

Bedrock: It is the nectar of life.

Radha and Um: (*Slurp*) May our lives always end at the feet of the Earth

(Sound piece ends with a growing wall of song and snippets of memories collected from our workshop event, this being all that the Bedrock holds for us.)