

## Scrublands by Knox Chitiyo

*Praise the unknown helper, the life in a day  
meandering/ with purpose/ from shift to shift  
They have journeyed from so far to be near,  
have quarantined/ their/ fear*

*Midwife Chipo@Chipo, made in Chi-town, Harare  
wears her buttoned- down phone  
in her left hand, unlocked and loaded as  
she prays for/ the new day /with /Anointed Apostle Ndini X,  
an Angel descended [evicted!]from Heaven  
Chipo saved a newborn from his baby mama's junkie fix  
zviri ku sparka as she rides the 99 bus to St George's Hospital  
Tooting  
Meanwhile, six thousand and one miles away,  
Her cousin B-,locked down on duty in Harare Hospital, asks yet  
again for  
known unknowns:PPE's*

*Sankoh, this dewy London morning, moves  
wearily on to his next appointment  
fresh from the pm to am frontline in the COVID ward  
kneading, pleading with the human clay wracked, now wrapped,  
on the bed,  
a breath whisperer. Tired he is but now straight to his day job  
His head nods on the bus, remembering his rice Jolof  
and dreams/ of /an England/ Prime Minister/ speaking in  
tongues, including Wolof.  
Jaam nga fanane*

*And Bulgarian Christiana, from steppes to steps  
care nursing to support her Aged - with those cheekbones,  
she could've been a model. But her calling was bright- sized  
life, not Size Zero.*

*And Ramon likes her. He shrugs off his scrubs , lights a  
wax candle for his Cristina every night  
who/ says/ you/ can't/ find / love/ during plague-time?*

*Mark Jones, FRCS, the suture king, steady as a rock in theater  
but*

*so often loses in joy what he's earned thru pain*

*Selfie Elphie, 57, lived before she died*

*always cheerful, always working despite her body's malcontents,  
gold- tongued, open-mic'd,*

*with/ a smile/ that lit up/ London. Her son/was/ in a gang /but/  
he kissed/ the deep water.*

*The younger one's just made partner in a law firm. But, just last  
night, death's trumpet called her*

*to come home/ alone/in A sharp minor*

*J'aanice does her ward rounds, seeing everything.*

*She wants to touch the sky, but-*

*her application for promotion has been denied again*

*y'all /can /reason /why*

*But still, she's ☹️ infected by joy. She's just bought her first house.*

*The bleep/ bleep of the respirator, the bleep- holder, the agony  
shoulders*

*the up-the- stairs/ down- the -stairs/ the stents and catheters*

*and ward rounds and care homes and live- ins and mental health  
help*

*the living the dying the dead the resurrected; the tumult. Lives  
of quiet respiration*

*and giving more than you can ever give,  
'cos that's all you can give*

*But, pause the 'plause;  
thuh.. this, is... is not a praise poem  
they wouldn't want it to be  
it is/ ummm../The Humanisations /  
imagined-reality chronicles of /lives lived with/ feeling,  
without glamour.*

*Babatunde, a hospital cleaner for 28 years  
and his wife Daisy from Jamaica, a care worker for 20.  
their feet/knees/ hands/ scabbed/ from/ scrubbing:  
those mops, pails and brushes have sent their children five to  
University  
They've seen it all. Babatunde says  
- look/ listen, yoh/ Remember us/ the unknown helpers, for we/  
have  
stories to tell, if dem ears heah. And, Daisy adds, with a tear and  
a twinkle - remember too,  
that sometimes, black/ do /crack, out here in the Scrublands  
But. We .Don't. Break.We.R. Still.Here*

*"What is your name again?"*