

Eric Henry Sanders
From *The Heliopause*

Act II, Scene 10

HÉLÈNE

The next day I woke to a gray sky. There is something to be said for waking up to a day cast over with clouds. Gray night recedes into gray day and dreams blend casually with waking. It bears none of the shock which the beauty of a blazing sun carries on its sharp-edged back. (*Pause.*) He had been standing outside for an hour. He didn't knock.

Lights up rapidly on the man.

NEIGHBOR

I have no place else to go.

Pause.

NEIGHBOR (*cont'd*)

This was once my home.

HÉLÈNE

Do you expect me to leave?

Pause for a reply.

HÉLÈNE (*cont'd*)

Then send me away! Send me to *my* home. Show me where it is and I'll gladly go there.

NEIGHBOR

I don't know where your home is.

HÉLÈNE

You know where it is.

Pause.

NEIGHBOR

I wanted to be here again, to see this place.

HÉLÈNE

I sometimes walk from one room to another and my footsteps echo.

NEIGHBOR

Is it just you?

HÉLÈNE

Ask me who is missing that I can walk from room to room without seeing a soul.

NEIGHBOR

You must have heard on the radio that we would return.

HÉLÈNE

Yes.

NEIGHBOR

We have a mandate from the president.

HÉLÈNE

I hear a lot on the radio. Once I heard them announce my family's name and give our address. Maybe you heard it?

NEIGHBOR

You must have also heard that the violence is over. That the Hutu were forced to leave.

HÉLÈNE

Not before my family was killed.

NEIGHBOR

I remember --

HÉLÈNE

-- He said, and left silently. (*Lights down slowly on the man.*) That was the end of the second day.

Pause.

HÉLÈNE (cont'd)

When he returned again, I was afraid it was with a much different purpose. It occurred to me in the night that I am the only witness against him. It was his house that I lived in, and I could see no other reason for him to be here. When I saw him walking up the street my heart beat against my ribs.

NEIGHBOR

I had no intention of hurting her.

HÉLÈNE

I looked around for something to hit him with...

Lights up on the man.

NEIGHBOR

I know others had sought to... to protect themselves by getting rid of witnesses against them. The government was still questioning people, after all. But I had no intentions in that direction. I asked for her forgiveness.

HÉLÈNE
(*Outraged.*)

Forgiveness!

NEIGHBOR

I know the things that had transpired, but in my heart all I wanted was peace. For my family, too. (*Then to her.*) Perhaps if you could see what happened. If we could both hear the other, perhaps we might find peace together.

HÉLÈNE

And that night I cried. I cried in fear, and anger, and sorrow. For the memory of what I had. I cried out in frustration: how could he ask me to consider the possibility of forgiveness? How could anyone find the strength? I looked outside my window. I stood in a nightgown and felt my feet grow cold. Then something truly surprising happened. In my rage and fear and sorrow I found that, because he had asked it, a burden was lifted.

(*To him.*) Where I cannot see you close, where I must view you from the outer heights of the universe, you have paradoxically been reduced to poetry. I can only see you where you can be picked over by scholars, your meter counted out by a tapping foot. If I see the blush of your skin, if I try to see your eyes, I want to find them gouged out.

He listened attentively as I spoke, and that made an impression.

And I told him of the heliopause.

NEIGHBOR

There is a point in space where the sun's magnetism no longer exists, and this is called the heliopause.

HÉLÈNE

I will look at you from there.

NEIGHBOR

A distant speck.

HÉLÈNE

But you have to tell the truth. If you can tell me what happened that night, I will do my best to forgive you.

NEIGHBOR

This was unexpected.

HÉLÈNE

But I have to hear the truth.

NEIGHBOR

You know what happened.

HÉLÈNE

Tell me!

NEIGHBOR

My heart caught in my throat when I began to talk. My body rebelled against the idea. (*To her.*) No, I'm sorry.

HÉLÈNE

Did you expect it to be easy? Did you think I would thank you and you could walk away?

Pause.

HÉLÈNE (cont'd)

Tell me what happened that night.

NEIGHBOR

When I began to speak my mouth was dry.

HÉLÈNE

I could see him struggle and I was glad.

NEIGHBOR

By no means was I the first to commit acts of violence.

HÉLÈNE

Attacks began April 7th. Bertrand returned the last week of April. The slaughter continued through July.

NEIGHBOR

We had been told for weeks that this was part of a civil war. We had been told for our entire lives that we lived under the oppressive spell of history. And the world watched. We heard on the radio that the rest of the world would not interfere.

HÉLÈNE

Occasionally there would be a look which posed a disquieting question, but we rarely talked anymore.

NEIGHBOR

We were told to attend a meeting. It was done in secret, and everyone knew. Like everything, it was announced over the radio. My friend Alec was in charge, and with him was a man in a military uniform who I had never seen before. They told us where we were supposed to be, the time and the day, and then they sent us home.

HÉLÈNE

In these days, they continued to announce the names of all the Tutsi in the country. For hours on end they read places and street numbers. The radio said that it was a patriotic duty to listen and record these things.

NEIGHBOR

I had never thought of Alec as anything much, but standing next to that military man, he was very impressive. He was taken very seriously.

HÉLÈNE

They again read my name. The name of my husband. The name of my son. The name of my baby. The names of my father and aunt. The names of my close friends. The names of my acquaintances. The names of those people I only knew by sight. In those nights they called the names of everyone I ever knew; eight hundred thousand people. Names to fill a city. Hiroshima. Belfast twice over. Selma and Jackson and Mobile together. Eight hundred thousand people. Larger than Napoleon's grand army. Rwanda is an earthquake which swallowed all San Francisco. Every last person.

NEIGHBOR

When we first began, there was something very exciting in the air. I went to find my colleagues and when I did I saw that they were already drunk. Then we drank together and celebrated because we knew that we were about to embark on something great -- a revolution. We could feel our ancestors who lived and died in oppression pushing up their strength through the ground, like the warmth of the sun, like fingers wrapping around our ankles. Like a great animal which would lift us and carry us away. I drank and raised my head and the camaraderie of this moment alleviated any doubts. Their conviction lifted me.