

# A Thorn in the Sole

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Mayxaano was a twenty-six-and-a-half-year-old revered writer, though I have to remind you there were many people who reviled her, too. She debated with men about politics, philosophy, and religion with gusto. She wore her hair loose, without the Muslim head-scarf. She ran track and field, leaving most men in the dust, and, worst of all, it was rumored that she dared to write critical articles about the repressive regime in Somalia in newspapers abroad. Women vilified her publicly yet admired her privately. Men of all shades, however, would stumble over each other to have her attention for even a minute.

So in his senior year, Ayaanle was bemused when she called him one day and suddenly asked what was new. After all, she knew that he had nothing to share. He was a member of the Sheikh High School Writing Club and she was on the advisory board. He was an “A” student and she was the best Somali language and literature teacher. He was seventeen years old and she was, you know, twenty-six and a half! After meticulously choosing her words, Mayxaano told him that she was willing to “mentor” him. In what, she did not say.

Of course, Ayaanle had no clue what she was going to mentor him in, yet he was unwilling to guess, lest it would spoil the anticipated delight.

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At 2:00 p.m. on Monday of the following week, when classes were let out after the day’s work, Ayaanle had already forgotten about their

encounter and what had been said. Like an army of locusts, teachers and students poured out, descending upon the unprotected grass with a vengeance. The distinctive, legendary uniform of white shirts and khaki pants for the secondary school students particularly conjured up heartfelt adoration from all corners of life, for they were the greatest pride of Somalis then. It was said that the soil, the trees, and the meadows that they harassed by trampling were tolerant of the inadvertent carelessness, though the abuse would make it easier for the wind to blow off the rich topsoil of the land between the small town of Sheikh and the two schools (the intermediate and the secondary), but no one minded it at all.

Mayxaano cat-walked on an imaginary fashion runway obvious to her but, of course, invisible to the throng of men flanking her minutes after the bell for the last classes had rung out. Confidently, she walked with a graceful firmness, taking one step at a time at a measured pace—not too fast, not too slow, and without too much panache. Teachers and students alike were vying for her attention when she suddenly veered to the left, emerging from the herd of men that had been gallivanting around her.

Ayaanle found himself on her path, among friends though, and was not willing to transfer all the attention focused on her onto himself. But, of course, in his heart of hearts, he appreciated her guarded interest, yet he wished it was not paraded right in front of everyone else!

“Oh my God, is she coming to me?,” he whispered to himself, casting his gaze away. Realizing that she was heading towards him for sure, he tried to trot out of the way.

She called out to him with certainty, “Ayaanle, please wait for me.”

Ayaanle stopped in his tracks. He looked around as though there were a thousand other Ayaanles who had just elected to be there all at once. But Mayxaano did not let him hide in his boyish body of ill confidence.

“You are my Ayaanle, are you not?,” she asked. “You must know that I don’t care much for the rest of the Ayaanles.”

A bit embarrassed, Ayaanle managed to turn around hesitantly, as his friends moved on. “Hello, Mayxaano, good afternoon to you, too,” he said.

She laughed as she picked up the pace a bit to catch up with him. “Good morning, Ayaanle. I mean good afternoon.”

Ayaanle looked upon Mayxaano approaching with her well-measured strides. Balancing about half-a-dozen books on her right shoul-

der, she let her left hand dangle at her side. Her well-crafted hips, sculpted middle, and dark-dipped Afro accentuated the iron-starched blue pants and light amber shirt she was wearing. As she got closer, he was arrested by the passion of her smile, revealing a set of milk-white teeth, all artfully aligned.

"I was thinking," Mayxaano said.

"Thinking about what?," Ayaanle asked.

"Well," she said, by now walking beside him, "I have been cognizant of your ability to recite Somali poetry, particularly what our generation calls songs...but I call it poetry, molded in melody. I am also captivated by that mellifluously magnificent voice of yours," she went on.

"Hold it, hold it, Mayxaano," Ayaanle said.

"Let me finish, please," Mayxaano begged.

"Well, go ahead," Ayaanle replied.

"And if you think that I am going to tell you to devote your entire life to it, you are wrong," she said.

"What do you have in mind, Mayxaano?," Ayaanle asked.

"Well," she said, bringing her books down from her shoulder with both hands and holding them up against her chest, "I would like you to collect a specific set of songs, and I will do the same—so for one, we can preserve them, and second, we can write a book about them."

"A book, a book, Mayxaano!," shouted Ayaanle.

"Relax, Ayaanle, and just listen to me. What on earth do you think writing a book is about?"

"I have no idea what writing a book is about, but I have to tell you, it sounds like an enormous undertaking, and, your Highness, may I remind you—if you have not already noticed—that I have barely mastered the art of avoiding to pee in my pants, let's say, not so long ago," said Ayaanle.

"Come on," said Mayxaano, bringing her books down, flaunting them on her right hip and placing her left hand on his shoulder, "that is why it sounds so ominous, Brother Ayaanle. But you have to let me explain."

"Why don't you, please?," he said, looking at her but walking.

"Okay, okay. Then you have to listen to me, and please, no interruptions, okay?"

"Okay, okay. I will not interrupt but..."

"No, Ayaanle, no. There are no buts."

"Well, thanks for making it clear that I do not have to think for myself. I do not have a choice anyway, do I?," Ayaanle asked.

"No, you don't. But you have to pay attention to me regardless."

"All right, Mayxaano. I am all yours."

"You see, Ayaanle, the only time that Somali men and women are romantic is when they are hiding behind the veil of poetry. And I'll tell you why."

"Why Mayxaano?," interjected Ayaanle.

"Well, the reasons are many but chief amongst them is the enduring impact that the poetry has on us. We revere it, enjoy it, and most of all, we fear it. Historically, poetry spurred conflicts that went on for decades and claimed an untold number of lives, such as the *Guba*, the Blazer Series.<sup>1</sup> As you are also aware, a half-century or so after it was composed, not a page of that whole series has been written about. And even though the so-called government does not acknowledge it, it survived through it all—the atrophy of mind, the human neglect, and the biased tribalism—because people who loved it committed it to memory, preserved it, and passed it on to posterity.

"Mayxaano, you are running away with the topic...," interjected Ayaanle.

"You said you were not going to interrupt," said Mayxaano, drawing her hand away from his shoulder and looking straight at him, but still walking.

"Sorry, Mayxaano," Ayaanle laughed.

"...because the series has a bit of everything that identifies us as Somalis: the tribal bravado, the potential wisdom, the provocative bragging...as well as the classical paradox of peace and belligerence that has marked our survival. In other words, Ayaanle, there is a treasure to cherish that we need to tap into. And we have just been through the most productive time in terms of poetry performed in new ways and contexts. I mean songs have come out at an unprecedented rate for the last few years, and I dare to predict it will go on with the same pace as we are about to bid the 1970s farewell and usher in the 1980s. And I have to say that they are very powerful. But you are right. My excitement is running away with me, so I have to contain myself."

"Thank God. It's about time you take note of that," said Ayaanle.

"Ayaanle, you gave me your word that you would not do that, remember?," Mayxaano winked.

"Yes, yes, Mayxaano, how could I ever forget?"

"Well, I can't help it, Ayaanle. I love this topic," she blushed.

"So I noticed," Ayaanle replied.

“Anyway,” Mayxaano went on, “I would love to mentor you on this narrow focus whereby you will collect songs that subdue, serenade, and sedate women. I have to tell you where to start: Cumar Dhuule. If you ever get to him, you will have the weapon to mass seduce women. His songs are the opium of love and life. You just get me a tape of Cumar Dhuule and I have to let you know, I feel pity for the rest of the women around the world who are wrapped in romance novels but do not have Dhuule’s sugar-sweet melodies, sensual erotic lyrics, hypnotic heavenly voice, and the alliteration of his well aligned stanzas. My God, how I would love for the world to have a taste of the Somali language in the poetry of romance!”

“So, Mayxaano, are you saying that it isn’t only Cumar Dhuule, but we Somalis who are naturally gifted when it comes to poetry?”

Mayxaano was already waltzing.

If I am not of pronounced presence at your side,  
Oh, merciless one, I should sever my attachment to you,  
Nonetheless, I am staggering under the weight of love,  
My feet can’t stay firm on the ground,  
And this stomach has foregone haleness.

*Haddaanan ku cuslayn dhankaaga cidla ah  
Ciirsilaay ana kaa calool go’ay  
Culayskan i saaran ciir ciiro  
Caguhu Qaban waaye Ciida dhulkoo  
Calooshaan i caafimaad qabin*

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Ayaanle, who had thought that he knew Mayxaano well, was stunned to hear her sing and was awestruck by the beauty of her rendition of Cumar Dhuule’s legendary sweet voice, the perfect timing of her tempo, and the cadence of her delivery. Ayaanle, agape, stood staring. Never in his life had he heard such a pleasant imitation of Dhuule before. He had not known that part of Mayxaano. Ayaanle froze for a moment.

“And to answer your question, Ayaanle, yes, we Somalis are naturally gifted, period, when it comes to poetry in general. However, I am saying that there are others, of course, but there was no one, no one like him, who could command your attention with the same intensity of joy in romantic poetry. As a matter of fact, what I would have liked

is to embark on an effort to gather songs that have been composed to woo, compliment, and cultivate love. If you pay attention particularly to those songs we call *darandoori*, in which a male and female each sing a verse in turn, you would be mesmerized,” Mayxaano went on. “As you know, there is also another set called *subcis*, in which a man or a woman leads but a choir follows with a harmonious chant. I have to tell you, these are some of the most gratifying, gut-wrenching literary treasures that I have known. I wish I had the capacity to share them with the rest of the world, but first we have to introduce them here in our own society. Oh you see, it’s now quite clear what I want to mentor you in, and it’s crystallizing before me the more I talk it over with you. All you have to do is listen to a bunch of *darandoori* and *subcis* songs, select a few you deem the best, collect them, and we will use them comparatively to test whether Dhuule is indeed the best of all. Possibly we will write together, but most importantly, we will gather memorable material for future generations.”

Again, Mayxaano picked up Cumar Dhuule’s melodic syrup where she left off:

Coming to know someone can be deadly,  
Or portend blessing and peace,  
I scold myself for the day I saw you,  
And blame my voice that failed to win your love.

Love struck me on a fateful afternoon,  
And seized a delicate part of my body,  
Now I am trying to reach out for the “camel in the sky,”  
Oh my soul that is keen on salvaging the untenable,  
You may not complain or remonstrate.

*Caguyeyy barashada mid baa cuduroo  
mid baa codcod iyo caano iyo nabad oo  
Cashadaan ku arkaan canaantaay naftoo  
Waan ciilkaambiyaa codkaygii yeyy*

*Cishqi baa I haleelay goor casaroo  
Waxaa buu cuskaday cakuyeyy helistoo  
Waanigan la cabbaaya awrkii cirkoo  
Nafyahay cawa daranta ciidamisa  
Hay caban waxana hay callaalin*

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Ayaanle was dazed. The pleasure of hearing Mayxaano singing left him with a tingling sensation throughout his body, teasing his brain into considering an ethereal leap to touch heaven. He did not say a word but stopped walking, and stared at the tip of a mountain where the horizon met a patch of sun-bathed trees. For the first time in his life, tears gathered in his eyes, a lump formed in his throat, and waves of affection flooded his heart. Yet he did not want her to see him cry. Crying was for women and weak men! Of course, there was no exception to the patriarchal rule, nurtured through the passage of time in this part of a particular world.

Wrestling with stirred emotions, Ayaanle stood there for a minute, but Mayxaano, lost in thought, moved on ahead, still elucidating her mission. "You see, if I give you an example of our *darandoori* romantic songs, I am one-hundred percent certain you will...," she turned back to look, "join me."

"Where are you?" Mayxaano saw that Ayaanle was twenty feet away. "Ayaanle, have I been pouring water into the ocean or have you been listening to me?," she asked, and stood still as well to wait for him.

Now somewhat composed, but still reeling from the shock, "Mayxaano, who are you?," asked Ayaanle, as he caught up with her.

Though he tried to mask his emotions with a façade of masculinity, Mayxaano immediately peeled the top layer off. "Ayaanle, I can't believe I got through to you! Did you really cry because I was that bad or was it the other way around? Well, either way, I am glad you were somewhat impressed, yet I am a bit disturbed because you look dissatisfied," she said with laughter. Mayxaano held her books up with both hands and hit him playfully over the shoulder. As Ayaanle pretended to shield himself from the onslaught, she pulled her hands back, put the books on her right hip again, and held them there with one hand, while continuing to walk. "Ayaanle," she said, looking at him, "I did not know this soft side of you. I really didn't."

"Well, I thought all along that I knew you, Mayxaano, since the day I learned to walk. But, but then...I had no idea that you could sing. I think the angels will soon be filing requests for a recital by you," Ayaanle said.

"Hey, hey, don't chase me away from this world. It's too much fun to be alive. Whenever I hear angels filing requests for entertainment, I know I am dead."

"Ooh, so you have known all along that you are too good for a human audience?," Ayaanle said.

"Well, my little brother, let us go back to my topic before you blunder yourself into a river of blasphemy."

"No, Mayxaano, I want to know how long you have known that you have a wealth to share, but chose not to?"

"Sweetie, to be frank with you, I have always known that I could sing but, for many millions of reasons, I postponed it just to break through a thick cloud of doubt, on a day when no one will be expecting it," said Mayxaano. "So lo and behold, it is today, and you have a front row seat. I will let you know more about this soon, but can we please get back to what has been gnawing at me for decades so at least I can get it off my chest?," she continued.

"Well, you may do just that, your Royalty." Ayaanle extended both hands and opened them up as though he was about to frog leap, like a ballet dancer, dispelling the notion of emotional frailty in his mind.

"Did I present my case well?," she asked, playing along.

"Well, your Honor..."

"Hold on, hold on. I haven't finished," she interrupted. "Not yet."

"Okay, okay, you have the floor."

"Got you. I was trying to see whether you have been paying attention to me, and, come to think of it, I have no complaints to lay on you. At least not now," Mayxaano said.

"So would I surmise from that conclusion that I can indulge myself with a rebuttal, a counterargument, if you will?," Ayaanle asked.

"Wait a minute! Whoever led you to believe that there is a counterargument here, I don't know, but my proposal is dictatorial in nature. The only leniency is that you can take it or leave it. And let me tell you, you are not at liberty to bring your rude, unrefined counteroffensive to my proposal!," said Mayxaano.

"Seriously, Mayxaano, I think you are on to something but you have yet to get to the example or examples of *darandoori* or *subcis* songs you were clamoring about. Are you aware of that?"

"You are absolutely correct, my sagacious brother. May I take it as a compliment that the many decades I have been pouring out everything I know for you are finally paying off?," Mayxaano said, wiggling her hips.

“For the sake of your vanity, I should say amen to that,” laughed Ayaanle. “So let us hear a luxurious note or two from a legend in the making,” Ayaanle said, prompting imaginary applause from an imaginary audience by clapping his hands and turning to his right, then left, and behind him, too, and then bowing.

“Well, *darandoori*. Whom should I pick?,” she asked, looking at Ayaanle.

“Here we go again,” said Ayaanle. “How on earth would you expect me to know? I am not in...”

“Hold it, hold it, there it goes, one of my most favorites, Salaad Derbi and Saynab Cige Hadhigle. Please listen to this *darandoori*.”

SHE: My love

Desire is like a wound  
that words cannot heal.  
You speak of your burden,  
but are not frank with me.  
Search deeper for the causes of your distress,  
and don't cover them up.

HE: Oh, precious one,  
there is a shady tree that is an asset,  
and has many fruits for which one hungers  
but does not dare to try to pick  
Any son of a mother<sup>2</sup> makes mistakes sometimes,  
but I urge you to collaborate with me  
on this task of Love.

SHE: Halyeeyoow waxaa jira  
meel hoo u baahani  
hadal kuma bogsootee  
  
Halkan aad ileedahay  
waa hawlo kugu maqan  
waanaad iga hodooshee  
  
Hoos u dhaadhac  
waxaad hiban  
harag cowl ha-saarine

HE: Haldhaayeey waxaa jira,  
geed hadh waynoo  
hanti aad u leedahya

Hoobaanta midhaha  
ku hayso gaajo  
aanad kuna hagaageyn

Nin habari dhashay  
hal ma seegi waayee  
howlahan bal ila qabo

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Ayaanle froze again. All his muscles were locked in position. His larynx box refused to vibrate and his lips quivered with tremulation. He stood staring. In his mind he had just traveled through a tunnel of joy, but he could not proceed to participate in the singing. He knew the song well, had sung it along with Saynab Cige and Salaad Derbi over the radio, had seen them live in concert more than ten times, and most of all, had always been moved by the lyrics and their golden voices. He tried to join her, but could not command the will to utter a word. Ayaanle was in awe of her angelic voice but was also overpowered by internal emotions. Now he no longer needed to disguise his feelings, nor did he try to disown them. Tears, drop by drop, rolled down his cheeks. With a heavy heart, Ayaanle lowered himself to the ground. Leaning on his left hand and knee, he covered his eyes with the palm of his right hand.

Mayxaano stopped singing, put her books on the ground, bent her knees, held Ayaanle's chin up with her right hand and tried to wipe the tears with the other. But Ayaanle shifted his weight onto the other knee and hand, turning away from her. Mayxaano began to stroke his hair. "Ayaanle, is my voice that bad as to cause you such pain?," she teased. "Hey, gather yourself or else I will let my wailing wear you out. And know this, this time I will hold nothing back." Mayxaano stood up, dusted her knees off, and held Ayaanle's right hand, pulling him up to help him stand on his feet. She picked up her books and started walking. Ayaanle stood up, wiped the tears from his eyes with one hand, dusted his pants off with the other, and walked after her.

"I am sorry," he said to Mayxaano.

Beneath the marveled beauty and multiple talents laid layers of grief laden with pain. Both Mayxaano herself and Cumar Dhuule, the man about whom she was self-sworn to write, were born to the *Midgan* kin, one of the most ostracized minority groups in Somalia. On top of that, she was a woman. Thus, she was well aware of why her pro-

tégé was overcome with emotion. She knew that he had just cried her tears for her because she was not able to reach the top in a society that saddled her with injustice, for the class and clan order put her on its lowest rung. She knew full well that he knew that the main reason she had never sung before an audience or called attention to her sensual singing voice was that she feared people would accuse her of lascivious, lewd behavior—just to malign her otherwise impeccable integrity. She knew that it was not lost on Ayaanle that all those men swarming about her like bees were trying to have her for dessert. No one, not a single one of them, would have been courageous enough to take her as a wife. In their eyes, she was not worthy of their matrimonial crown. In reality, though, they were not even worthy of her shoes.

In the next few minutes, they walked side by side, with the solemn silence broken only by steps determined to press on. As they approached the shadow-skirt of the small town, the footpath diverged and each chose a different path. Both proceeded with a cautious gait that did not violate their unspoken oath of keeping the bond of love between them beneath the surface. No, no, not the kind of love in which a man lusts after a woman or a woman's emotions are lacerated with pain when she is jilted. Theirs was more than that: it was gentle, kind, and most of all it was real, like the flesh and features of a human figure. Theirs had transcended the human kind and was built on a pure faith of trusting one another. They had developed a bond so strong that people of persuasion in their particular village spread a rumor that they belonged to a jinn group that were said to live below the mountaintop to the north of the small town. It did not help if you were so bold as to ask why one can neither see nor talk to these spirits, for they would pelt you with stones or the "sagacious" members of the religious sect would cane you! Really, though, Ayaanle and Mayxaano's love was an unadulterated love. A common admiration for writing and an irrepressible affection for Somali poetry irrigated their love. They had not one iota of romantic inclination for each other, and they both knew it. They had grown up in the same neighborhood in another village, and their age gap of half-a-dozen or so years would have made such infatuation socially unthinkable. It would have caused a riot of laughter, ranting ridicule, and a ravenously irrational attempt to get them to self-destruct...but they knew that too.

Mayxaano was well aware of Ayaanle's ability in and passion for writing. He adored Somali poetry, and nurtured a tender love for the newest version: songs. Mayxaano knew as well that Ayaanle had

already memorized more than a thousand songs. Therefore, she was determined to make him aware of the importance of his talent. She wanted him to organize his thoughts and bring them into the open, so that he could learn how to profit from his labor of love. Yet, Mayxaano was not sure whether she had chosen the right moment and had succeeded in planting the seeds of future success. Reasonably, though, she was a bit startled and somewhat concerned by the outpouring of emotions that Ayaanle had shown. Thus, she was willing to let the matter rest, to be resurrected at a later date.

Mayxaano was about to turn a corner when waves of music suddenly greeted her. She stopped and looked back to see whether Ayaanle had heard the same modulated, melodic voices that would have caused world dignitaries to beg for more. Ayaanle, too, had heard the humming emanating from two or three blocks away, on the other side of the small town. He turned around. Had Mayxaano heard the joyful melody of the *subcis*? "Mayxaano, did you hear that?," Ayaanle shouted.

"Yes, I do, but who is it?," Mayxaano shouted back.

"Who cares who it is, it's beautiful. Let's go and see," said Ayaanle, trotting back to her. Eagerly, they moved to where the blissful melody was originating. The closer they got, the calmer and the more soothingly captivating the harmony became. Soon they encountered a half-dozen or so boys and girls of high school age behind an abandoned building, under the shade of a huge acacia tree, singing a mesmerizing tune.

It was the rain that fell on Raydad-khaatumo  
that defeated us and drove us apart

Refrain: Oh Dhudi, please dance with me,  
I am sincere, so please dance with me.

There is a thorn in the sole of my foot  
and I cannot run away from the pain  
Dear God, is there another path  
that my lost soul can follow?

Refrain

You are the one who is taunting me,  
and I am not in search of anyone else  
You men and women, don't you gang up on me  
(just to laugh at me)

Refrain

God is my witness that there has never been anyone I have loved  
and searched for more than you

Oh Dhudi, please dance with me,  
I am sincere, so please dance with me.

*Roobkii helay Raydad-khaatumo  
Laguma raaye waa ina-kala raray*

Refrain: *Ila dheel Dhudiyeyy ila dheel  
Ila dheel waa dhabe ila dheel*

*Ragaadayoo roori karmaayee  
Rubatee Alloow yaa dhan kale ka rogoo  
Raacdeeya naftaydan raadka La*

Refrain

*Adigay ruxayee ma raadinayee  
Rag iyo dumar hay rafiiqina*

Refrain

*Rabbi baygu og ruux aan kaa jeceloo  
Aan raadsho la iima soo rogin*

*Ila dheel, Dhudiyeyy ila dheel  
Ila dheel, waa dhabe ila dheel*

First they thought there was one lead singer with a golden voice, but then it became clear to them that the students took turns singing a verse of Cumar Dhuule's "Dance with Me Dhudi." Each one would reach a crescendo and end, followed by the choir singing the refrain. Then another singer would come in and sing a verse, again followed by the chorus, and so forth—a cascading croon that could have calmed a king seething with anger. The accompanying musical instruments were simply a lute and a drum. Yet they yielded immense joy, perfectly suited to Mayxaano's plea to Ayaanle to collect Cumar Dhuule's treasures.

As the impromptu corner concert came to an end, Ayaanle realized that the most venerated Sheikh of the town, whom he had heard vociferously preaching against music of any kind, was in the audience. It dawned on him then that the entire population of the small town was present, given the fact that even the slothful, lazy-minded Cambaro-

shaal, who had never been seen civilly seated, was in an armchair, totally absorbed, holding her only goat by the ear, keeping it beside her. When people began to disperse, Ayaanle turned to Mayxaano, lifting his face toward hers. "Mayxaano," he said, "you just got yourself an apprentice. I hope the market will be big enough for both of us."

Mayxaano graciously laughed, turned around, and walked away. At about a thirty-yard distance, she looked back. Ayaanle was still standing where she left him. "Ayaanle," she cried to him, "he who waits for inspiration to come only harvests the pain begotten by time wasted... . So Cumar Dhuule is your choice, I gather." She turned on her heels and moved away.

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### Notes

1. See Abdullahi Hassan Roble, *Silsiladda Guba: Guba Poems* (Stockholm: Scansom Publishers, 1999).
2. "Son of a mother" is the literal equivalent of "human being."