

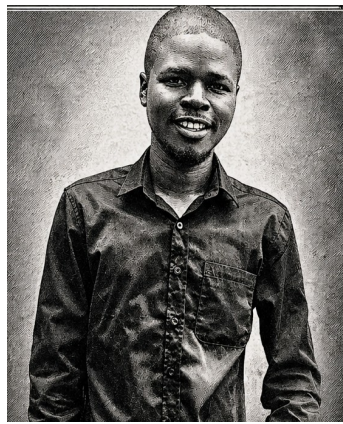
***"Let the young man in desperation go out and hunt.  
If he kills the elephant, his poverty ends.  
If the elephant kills him, his poverty still ends."***

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# **HUNT OR BE HUNTED BY POVERTY**

*On Desperate Courage, the Will to Act,  
and Why Paralysis Is the Only True Defeat*

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## **Abstract**

This paper takes a proverb as its compass: the young man who goes out to hunt in desperation cannot lose. If he kills the elephant, poverty ends in triumph. If the elephant kills him, poverty ends in release. Either way, the only guaranteed loss belongs to the man who stays home and does nothing. Drawing on philosophy, lived African experience, and the psychology of action under adversity, this paper argues that desperate courage -- the willingness to move when comfort and certainty are both absent -- is not recklessness. It is the highest form of rational hope. It is addressed to every young person who feels the weight of a world that did not ask their permission before becoming difficult.

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## 1. The Proverb and Its Weight

Some wisdom arrives dressed in philosophy. Some arrives dressed in suffering. The proverb at the heart of this paper arrived dressed in both. It was not written in any library. It was spoken -- perhaps by a grandmother watching a grandson sit too long in a doorway, or by a father who had once faced his own elephant and had the scars, or the empty hands, to prove it.

The logic of the proverb is ruthless in its honesty. The young man is already in desperation. That is the starting condition -- not a warning, but a fact. Poverty is already present. The question is not whether to suffer, but whether to suffer actively or passively. The hunt is not a guarantee of success. The proverb does not promise the elephant will fall. It promises only that movement -- real, committed, life-staking movement -- resolves the situation. Paralysis does not.

This is the paper's first and most important claim: **inaction is not safety. It is slow defeat.** The young man who stays home because he fears the elephant will not be killed by it. But he will be consumed -- day by day, dream by dream -- by the poverty he refused to confront.

## 2. On Desperation: The Misunderstood Fuel

We have been taught to fear desperation. We are told it leads to bad decisions, to crime, to moral collapse. And sometimes it does. But desperation, properly understood, is not a flaw in the human system -- it is a signal. It is the body and the spirit saying together: the current situation is incompatible with survival. Something must change.

History's greatest acts of courage were performed not by people who had options, but by people who had exhausted them. The hunger striker who fasts not because she is confident of winning, but because silence has become more unbearable than death. The entrepreneur who launches a business with nothing left to lose because having nothing left to lose is the only freedom the world allowed her. The student who walks forty kilometres to school not because the road is kind, but because the alternative -- illiteracy, invisibility, the foreclosure of all futures -- is worse than tired legs.

Desperation is not the enemy of wisdom. Comfortable complacency is. The man who has too much to lose rarely risks anything worth gaining. The young man with nothing but his courage and his hunger goes further, because he has already paid the price of admission to the hunt.

## 3. The Elephant: What We Are Really Talking About

The elephant in the proverb is not an animal. It is the specific, enormous, terrifying obstacle that stands between where you are and where you must go. For one young person, the elephant is exam failure -- the fear that the results will confirm what cruel voices have always whispered. For another, it is a business idea so large it seems absurd coming from someone so young, so poor, so unconnected. For another still, it is a corrupt system, a broken family, a body that does not cooperate, a community that laughs before it listens.

Every elephant is real. This paper does not insult your struggle by calling it imaginary. The elephant is large. The elephant is dangerous. The elephant has killed people before you, people with more resources and more support. That is true. And it does not change the proverb's logic by one syllable.

Because the alternative to hunting the elephant is not peace. It is the slow, silent crushing of the person you were meant to become. Poverty -- material, spiritual, intellectual -- does not wait politely at the door while you gather courage. It enters through every crack your inaction leaves open. The elephant that might kill you quickly in the hunt is more merciful than the poverty that kills you slowly on the couch.

#### **4. Two Kinds of Ending: Why Both Are Victory**

The proverb's genius is its symmetry. It offers not one escape from poverty but two.

**The first ending: you kill the elephant.** You pass the examination, launch the business, finish the degree, build the house, win the case, cross the border, publish the book, earn the respect. The hunt was brutal. You are marked by it. But you are standing, and the elephant is not. This is the ending everyone prays for. It is the story told at funerals, at graduations, at weddings -- the story of the one who went out and came back with meat.

**The second ending: the elephant kills you.** This is the ending people do not want to discuss. But the proverb does not flinch, and neither should we. To fall in the hunt -- in failure; in the worst cases, literally -- is to have lived as a full human being, reaching for something larger than yourself. The person who tried and failed spectacularly leaves behind a different legacy than the person who never tried. She leaves behind proof that a human being was here, and was not content with mere survival. He leaves behind children who saw their father stand up, even if he fell. The attempt itself is an inheritance.

What the proverb refuses -- what it makes logically indefensible -- is the third option: sitting at home while poverty grows larger and the elephant wanders

freely. That is not safety. That is surrender without dignity.

## **5. The Psychology of the Hunt: What Happens When You Move**

There is something that changes in a person the moment they decide to act. Psychologists call it agency -- the felt sense that one is an author of one's life, not merely a subject of it. Agency does not require success. It requires only the decision to move.

When the young man picks up his spear and walks toward the elephant, his body changes. His mind sharpens. His senses become instruments rather than recorders. He is no longer a spectator to his own suffering -- he has become a participant in the resolution of it. This shift is not small. It is, in the deepest sense, the beginning of dignity.

Research in psychology consistently shows that people who act under uncertainty, even when outcomes are poor, report higher wellbeing and self-respect than people who remain passive in the face of equivalent difficulty. It is not winning that heals the spirit. It is trying. The wound of failure closes faster than the wound of having never tried. The scar from the elephant's tusk is something you can tell a story about. The emptiness of the doorway you never left -- that has no story. It just has silence.

## **6. To the Young People of Uganda and Beyond**

I write this as a student, not as a professor. I do not write from the comfort of certainty or the authority of an achieved life. I write from inside the hunt. I know what it is to sit at a desk in a university building that the world treats as peripheral, studying problems that the world treats as already solved by people elsewhere. I know what it is to look at the elephant -- at poverty, at structural exclusion, at a system that was not built with your face in mind -- and to feel the weight of the spear in your hand and wonder if it is enough.

It may not be enough. The spear may break. The elephant may be larger than you estimated. I will not lie to you with false guarantees.

But I will tell you this: the young people who change their families, their communities, their countries -- they are not always the most talented. They are not always the best resourced. They are the ones who left the doorway. They are the ones who decided that the risk of the hunt was preferable to the certainty of slow defeat.

Go out. Not carelessly. Not blindly. Study your elephant. Learn its patterns. Find companions for the hunt if you can -- there is no shame in hunting together. But

when you have prepared as well as desperation allows, go. Take the step that moves you from the category of the waiting into the category of the moving. Because the world is changed by people who moved, not by people who planned indefinitely from a safe distance.

## **7. A Note on Failure: The Elephant Does Not Always Fall**

Let us be clear-eyed about this. Many hunts fail. Many elephants win. Many young people who act courageously and wisely and desperately still do not get the outcome they sought. This is real, and it is not the hunter's fault, and it does not invalidate the proverb.

The proverb does not say that courage guarantees success. It says that courage guarantees an end to a particular form of suffering -- the suffering of passivity, of wondering, of the life half-lived. When the hunt fails, there is grief. There is loss. There is the long walk home with empty hands. But there is also something that cannot be taken from the person who tried: the knowledge that they stood up. That they looked at the size of the thing that threatened them and chose to be larger than their fear.

And from that knowledge -- only from that knowledge -- the next hunt becomes possible. People who have genuinely attempted and failed are not broken. They are educated. They know the elephant's movements now. They know which ground is soft and which is firm. They carry within them a map that no classroom and no workshop could have given them. The failed hunter is, in most cases, the most dangerous hunter the next time.

## **8. Conclusion: Go Out**

The proverb asks nothing impossible of the young man in desperation. It does not ask him to be fearless -- it assumes he is afraid. It does not ask him to be powerful -- it knows he is poor. It does not ask him to be certain -- certainty is a luxury the desperate cannot afford. It asks only one thing: go out.

Go out with what you have. Go out in the condition you are in. Go out toward the elephant that has been making itself comfortable in your future. And in the going out -- in the act itself, before the outcome is known -- you have already done something that poverty cannot do: you have moved. You have decided. You have refused the slow death of the untried life.

The elephant may fall. You may fall. But either way, you will have lived with your whole chest open, having offered your full self to the one life you were given.

That is not desperation. That is the highest form of hope.

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***"The world belongs to those who show up for it,  
even when showing up costs everything they have."***

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### **About the Author**

**BANDHA ARAFAT** is a student at Gulu University, Uganda. He writes on politics, civic power, and the conditions of young Africans navigating systems that were not built for them. This paper was written on 26 April 2026.