

# WEIGHT OF WHISPERS

By Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor

The collection of teeth on the man's face is a splendid brown. I have never seen such teeth before. Refusing all instruction, my eyes focus on dental contours and craters. Denuded of any superficial pretence; no braces, no fillings, no toothbrush, it is a place where small scavengers thrive.

"Evidence!" The man giggles.

A flash of green and my US \$50 disappears into his pocket. His fingers prod: shirt, coat, trousers. He finds the worked snake skin wallet. No money in it, just a picture of Agnethe-mama, Lune and Chi-Chi, elegant and unsmiling, diamonds in their ears, on their necks and wrists. The man tilts the picture this way and that, returns the picture into the wallet. The wallet disappears into another of his pockets. The man's teeth gleam.

"Souvenir." Afterwards, a hiccupping "Greeeheeereeehee" not unlike a National Geographic hyena, complete with a chorus from the pack.

"Please...its...my mother...all I have".

His eyes become thin slits, head tilts and the veins on his right eye pulse. His nostrils flare, an indignant goat.

A thin sweat-trail runs down my spine, the backs of my knees tingle. I look around at the faceless others in the dank room. His hand grabs my goatee and twists. My eyes smart. I lift up my hand to wipe them. The man sees the gold insignia ring, glinting on my index finger.

The ring of the royal household. One of only three. The second belonged to my father. Agnethe-mama told me that when father appeared to her in a dream to

tell her he was dead, he was still wearing it. The third ...no one has ever spoken about.

The Policeman's grin broadens. He pounces. Long fingers. A girl would cut her hair for fingers like his. He spits on my finger, and draws out the ring with his teeth; the ring I have worn for 18 years - from the day I was recognised by the priests as a man and a prince. It was supposed to have been passed on to the son I do not have. The policeman twists my hand this way and that, his tongue caught between his teeth; a study of concentrated avarice.

"Evidence!"

Gargoyles are petrified life-mockers, sentries at entry points, sentinels of sorrow, spitting at fate. I will try to protest.

"It is sacred ring...Please...please." To my shame, my voice breaks.

"Evidence!"

Cheek: nerve, gall, impertinence, brashness.

Cheek: the part of my face he chose to brand.

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Later on, much later on, I will wonder what makes it possible for one man to hit another for no reason other than the fact that he can. But now, I lower my head. The sum total of what resides in a very tall man who used to be a prince in a land eviscerated.

Two presidents died when a missile launched from land forced their plane down. A man of note, a prince had said, on the first day, that the perpetrators must be hunted down. That evil must be purged from lives. That is all the prince had meant. It seems someone heard something else. It emerges later on, when it is too late, that an old servant took his obligation too far, in the name of his prince.

We had heard rumor of a holocaust, of a land hemorrhaging to death. Everywhere, hoarse murmurs, eyes white and wide with an arcane fear. Is it possible that brothers would machete sisters-in-law to stew-meat size chunks in front of nephews and nieces?

It was on the fifth day after the Presidents had disintegrated with their plane, that I saw that the zenith of existence cannot be human.

In the seasons of my European sojourn, Brussels, Paris, Rome, Amsterdam, rarely London, a city I could, then, accommodate a loathing to, I wondered about the unsaid; hesitant signals and interminable reminders of 'What They Did'. Like a mnemonic device, the swastika would grace pages and, or screens, at least once a week, unto perpetuity. I wondered.

I remembered a conversation in Krakow with an academician, a man with primeval eyes. A pepper-colored, quill-beard obscured the man's mouth, and seemed to speak in its place. I was, suddenly, in the thrall of an irrational fear; that the mobile barbs would shoot off his face and stab me.

I could not escape.

I had agreed to offer perspectives on his seminal work, a work in progress he called, 'A Mystagogy of Human Evil'. I had asked, meaning nothing, a prelude to commentary:

"Are you a Jew?"

So silently, the top of his face fell flowed towards his jaw, his formidable moustache-beard lank his shoulders shaking, his eyes flooded with tears. But not a sound emerged from his throat. Unable to tolerate the tears of another man, I walked away.

Another gathering, another conversation, with another man. Mellowed by the well being engendered by a goblet of Rémy Martin, I ventured an opinion about the sacrificial predilection of being; the necessity of oblation of men by men to men.

"War is the excuse." I said. I was playing with words, true, but, oddly the exchange petered into mumbles of 'Never Again'.

A year later, at a balcony party, when I asked the American Consul in Luxem-

bourg to suggest a book which probed the slaughter of Germans during World War II. She said:

“By whom?”

Before I could answer, she had spun away, turning her back on me as if I had asked “Cain, where is your brother?”

What had been Cain’s response?

To my amusement, I was, of course, never invited to another informal diplomatic gathering. Though I would eventually relinquish my European postings - in order to harness, to my advantage, European predilection for African gems - over après-diner Drambuie, now and again, I pondered over what lay beneath the unstated.

Now, my world has tilted into a realm where other loaded silences lurk. And I can sense why some things must remain buried in silence, even if they resuscitate themselves at night in dreams where blood pours out of phantom mouths. In the empire of silence, the ‘turning away’ act is a vain exorcism of a familiar daemon which invades the citadels we ever change, we constantly fortify. Dragging us back through old routes of anguish, it suggests: “Alas, human, your nature relishes fratricidal blood.”

But to be human is to be intrinsically, totally, resolutely good. Is it not?

Nothing entertains the devil as much as this protestation.

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Roger, the major-domo had served in our home since before my birth thirty seven years ago. He re-appeared at our door on the evening of the fifth day after the death of the two presidents. He had disappeared on the first day of the plane deaths. The day he resurfaced, we were celebrating the third anniversary of my engagement to Lune. I had thought a pungent whiff which entered the room with his presence was merely the Gorgonzola cheese Lune had been un-

wrapping.

Roger says:

“J’ai terminé. Tout a été nettoyé.” It is done. All has been cleaned.

“What Roger?”

“The dirt.” He smiles.

The bottle of Dom Pérignon Millésimé in my hand, wavers. I observe that Roger is shirtless, his hair stands in nascent, accidental dreadlocks. The bottom half of his trousers are torn, and his shoeless left foot, swollen. His fist is black and caked with what I think is tar. And in his wake, the smell of mouldering matter. Roger searches the ground, hangs his head, his mouth tremulous:

“They are coming...Sir.”

Then Roger stoops. He picks up the crumbs of petit fours from the carpet; he is fastidious about cleanliness. The Dom Pérignon Millésimé drops from my hand, it does not break, though its precious contents soak into the carpet. Roger frowns, his mouth pursed. He also disapproves of waste.

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In our party clothes and jewelry, with what we had in our wallets, and two packed medium-size Chanel cases, we abandoned our life at home. We counted the money we had between us: US \$ 3723. In the bank account, of course, there was more. There was always more. As President of the Banque Locale, I was one of three who held keys to the vault, so to say. Two weeks before the presidents died, I sold my Paris apartment. The money was to be used to expand our bank into Zaïre. We got the last four of the last eight seats on the last flight out of our city. We assumed then, it was only right that it be so. We landed at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi, Kenya at ten p.m.

I wondered about Kenya. I knew the country as a transit lounge and a stop over

base on my way to and out of Europe. It was only after we got a three months visitor's pass that I realized that Kenya was an Anglophone country. Fortunately, we were in transit. Soon, we would be in Europe, among friends.

I am Boniface Louis R. Kuseremane. It has been long since anyone called me by my full name. The "R" name cannot be spoken aloud. In the bustle and noises of the airport, I glance at Agnethe-mama, regal, graying, her diamond earrings dance, her nose is slightly raised, her forehead unlined. My mother, Agnethe, is a princess in transit. She leans lightly against Lune, who stands, one foot's heel touching the toes of the other, one arm raised and then drooping over her shoulder.

I met Lune on the funeral day of both her parents, royal diplomats who had died in an unfortunate road crash. She was then, as she is now, not of earth. Then, she seemed to be hovering atop her parents' grave, deciding whether to join them, fly away or stay. I asked her to leave the corps ballet in France where she was studying - to stay with me, forever. She agreed and I gained a sibylline fiancée.

"Chéri, que faisons-nous maintenant?" What do we do now?

Lune asks, clinging to my mother's hand. Her other arm curved into mine. Chi-Chi, my sister, looks up at me, expecting the right answer, her hand at her favorite spot, my waist band- a childhood affectation that has lingered into her twentieth year. Chi-Chi, in thought, still sucks on her two fingers.

"Bu-bu" Chi-Chi always calls me Bu-Bu. "Bu-Bu, dans quel pays sommes-nous?"

"Kenya" I tell her.

Chi-Chi is an instinctive contemplative. I once found her weeping and laughing, awed, as it turns out, by the wings of a monarch butterfly.

Low voiced, almost a whisper, the hint of a melody, my mother's voice. "Bonbon, je me sens très fatiguée, où domons-nous cette nuit?"

Agnethe-mama was used to things falling into place before her feet touched the ground. Now she was tired. Now she wanted her bed immediately. Without thinking about it, we checked into a suite of the Nairobi Hilton. We were, after all going to be in this country for just a few days.

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“Mama, such ugliness of style!” Lune’s summation of Kenyan fashion, of Kenyan hotel architecture. Mama, smiles and says nothing. She twists her sapphire bracelet, the signal that she agrees.

“Why do I see not see the soul of these people? Bonbon...are you sleeping?” Chi-Chi asks.

“Shh”, I say.

Two days later, Agnethe-mama, visited the jewelry shop downstairs. Not finding anything to suit her tastes, She concluded:

“Their language and manner are not as sweet and gentle as ours.”

She straightens her robes, eyes wide with the innocence of an unsubtle put down.

“Mama!’ I scold. The women giggle as do females who have received affirmation of their particular and unassailable advantage over other women.

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A week has passed already. In the beginning of the second one, I am awakened by the feeling I had when I found my country embassy gates here locked and blocked. The feeling of a floor shifting beneath one’s feet. There is no one in authority. The ambassador is in exile. Only a guard. Who should I speak to? A blank stare. I need to arrange our papers to go to Europe. A blank stare. A flag flutters in the courtyard. I do not recognize it. Then I do. It is my country’s flag,

someone installed it upside down. It flies at half-mast. An inadvertent act, I believe. Shifting sands: I am lost in this sea of English and I suspect that at five thousand Kenya shillings I have spent too much for a thirty kilometer taxi ride. Old friends have not returned phone calls.

The lines here are not reliable.

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Lune is watching me, her long neck propped up by her hands. Her hair covers half her face. It is always a temptation to sweep it away from her eyes, a warm silk. When the tips of my fingers stroke her hair, the palms of my hand skim her face. Lune becomes still, drinking, feeling and tasting the stroking.

Soon, we will leave.

But now, I need to borrow a little money: US\$5000. It will be returned to the lender, of course, after things settle down. Agnethe, being a princess, knows that time solves all problems. Nevertheless she has ordered me to dispatch a telegram to sovereigns in exile, those who would be familiar with our quandary and could be depended on for empathy, cash assistance and even accommodation. The gratitude felt would extend generation unto generation.

Eight days later, Agnethe-mama sighs; a hiss through the gap of her front teeth. She asks, her French rolling off her tongue like an old scroll.

“When are we leaving, Bonbon?” A mother’s ambush. I know what she really wants to know.

“Soon.” I reply.

“Incidentally,” she adds, folding Lune’s lace scarf, “What of the response of our friends in exile ...ah! Not yet...a matter of time” she says, answering herself.

“Agnethe-mama,” I should have said, “We must leave this hotel ...to save money.”



It is simpler to be silent.

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A guard with red-rimmed eyes in a dark blue uniform watches me counting out fifteen 1000 Kenya shilling notes. The eyes of the president on the notes blink with every sweep of my finger. The Indian lady in a pink sari with gold trim, the paint flaking off, leans over the counter, her eyes empty. My gold bracelet has already disappeared. Two days from this moment, while standing with Celeste on Kenyatta Avenue, where many of my people stand and seek news of home, or just stand and talk the language of home or hope that soon we will return home, I discover that fifteen thousand Kenya shillings is insufficient compensation for a 24 carat, customized gold and sapphire bracelet. Celeste knew of another jeweler who would pay me a hundred thousand for the bracelet.

I return to confront the Indian lady, she tells me to leave before I can speak.

She dials a number and shouts, high-voiced, clear; "Police". I do not want trouble so I leave the jewelry shop, unable to speak, but not before I see her smile. Not before I hear her scold the guard with the red-rimmed eyes.

"Why you let takataka to come in, nee?"

Outside the shop, my hands are shaking. I have to remind myself to take the next step and the next step and the next step. My knees are light. I am unable to look into the eyes of those on the streets. What is my mind doing getting around the intricacies of a foreign currency? I have to get out with my family.

Soon.

The newspaper on the streets, a vendor flywhisks dust fragments away. A small headline reads: 'Refugees: Registration commences at the UNHCR'.

The Kuseremanes are not refugees. They are visitors, tourists, people in transit, universal citizens with an affinity...well...to Europe.

'Kuseremane, Kuseremane, Kuseremane'...unbeknown to me, one whisper had started gathering other whispers around it.

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The Netherlands, the Belgium, the French, the British are processing visa applications. They have been processing them for three, four, five...nine days. At least they smile with their teeth as they process the visa applications. They process them until I see that they will be processed unto eternity, if only Agnethe, Chi-Chi, Lune and I could wait that long. There are other countries in the world.

Chi-Chi's ramblings yield an array of useless trivia:

" In Nairobi, a woman can be called Auntí or chilé, a president called Moi, pronounced Moyi, a national anthem that is a prayer and twenty shillings is a pao."

"But Bu-Bu...So many faces..."

So many spirits gather here..."

We must leave soon.

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The American embassy visa section woman has purple hair. Her voice evokes the grumbling of a he-toad which once lived in the marsh behind our family house in the country. One night, in the middle of its anthem, I had said;

"Ça suffit !" Enough!

Roger led the gardeners in the hunt which choked the croak out of the toad. At dawn, Roger brought the severed head to me, encased in an old, cigar case which he had wiped clean.

I cannot believe what this purple hair woman has asked of me.

“What?”

“Bank details...bank statement...how much money.”

My eyes blink, lashes entangle. Could it be possible another human being can simply ask over the counter, casually and with certainty of response, for intimate details of another person’s life?

I look around the room. Is it to someone else she addresses this question?

“And title deed. Proof of domicile in country of origin... And letter from employer.”

Has she not looked at my passport in her hands?

“I’m not Kenyan.”

She folds her papers, bangs them on the table and frowns as if I have wasted her time. She tosses my passport out of her little window into my hands that are outstretched, a supplication on an altar of disbelief.

“All applications made at source country...next!”

“Madame...my country...is...”

“Next!”

Woven into the seams of my exit are the faces in the line winding from the woman’s desk, into the street. Children, women and men, faces lined with... hope? I must look at that woman again, that purveyor of hope. So I turn. I see a stately man, his beard grey. His face as dark as mine. He stoops over the desk - a posture of abnegation. So that is what I looked like to the people in the line. I want to shout to the woman; I am Boniface Kuseremane, a prince, a diplomat.

I stumble because it is here, in this embassy that the fire-streaking specter of the guns which brought down two presidents find their mark in my soul. Like the eminent-looking man in a pin-striped suit, I am now a beggar.

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We have US\$ 520 left. My head hurts. When night falls, my mind rolls and rings. I cannot sleep.

The pharmacist is appealing in her way, but wears an unfortunate weave that sits on her head like a mature thorn bush. Eeeh! The women of this land! I frown. The frown makes the girl jump when she sees me. She covers her mouth with both her hands and gasps. I smile. She recovers:

“Sema!”

“Yes, sank you. I not sleep for sree nights and I feel...”

I plane my hands, rocking them against my head. She says nothing, turns around, counts out ten piritons and seals the envelope: “Three, twice a day, 200 shillings.”

These Kenyans and their shillings!

It is possible that tonight I will sleep. The thought makes me laugh. A thin woman wearing a red and black choker glances up at me, half-smiling. I smile back.

I cannot sleep. I have taken five of the white pills. Lune, beside me, in the large bed is also awake.

“Qu’est-ce que c’est? ” What is it?

“Rien.” Nothing.

Silence. Her voice, tiny. "I am afraid."

I turn away from her, to my side. I raise my feet, curling them beneath my body. I too am afraid. In the morning, the white Hilton pillow beneath my head is wet with tears. They cannot be mine.

The sun in Nairobi in May is brutal in its rising. A rude glory. My heart longs to be eased into life with the clarion call of an African rooster. Our gentle sunrises, rolling hills. Two months have passed. A month ago, we left the hotel. I am ashamed to say we did not pay our bill. All we had with us was transferred into and carried out in laundry bags. We left the hotel at intervals of three hours. We also packed the hotel towels and sheets. It was Lune's idea. We had not brought our own. We left our suitcases behind. They are good for at least US \$1500. Agnethe-mama is sure the hotel will understand.

We moved into a single roomed place with an outside toilet in River Road. I have told Agnethe-mama, Lune and Chi-Chi not to leave the rooms unless I am with them. Especially Chi-Chi.

"Bu-Bu, when are we leaving?"

Soon Agnethe-mama. Soon Lune. Soon Chi-Chi.

Chi-Chi has learned to say "Tafadhali, naomba maji." She asks for water this way, there are shortages.

We must leave soon.

Every afternoon, a sudden wind runs up this street, lifting dust, and garbage and plastic bags and whispers.

Kuseremane, Kuseremane, Kuseremane.

I turn to see if anyone else hears my name.

Sometimes, I leave the room to walk the streets, for the sake of having a desti-

nation. I walk, therefore I am. I walk therefore I cannot see six expectant eyes waiting for me to pull out an aeroplane from my pocket.

Ah! But tonight! Tonight, Club Balafon. I am meeting a compatriot and friend, René Katilibana. We met as I stood on the edge of Kenyatta Avenue, reading a newspaper I had rented from the vendor for five Kenya shillings. Four years ago, René needed help with a sugar deal. I facilitated a meeting which proved lucrative for him. René made a million francs. He offered me fifty thousand in gratitude. I declined. I had enjoyed humoring a friend. I am wearing the Hugo Boss mauves and the Hervé handkerchief. I am hopeful, a good feeling to invoke.

“Où vas-tu, chéri ?” Where are you going ? A ubiquitous question I live with.

I stretch out my arms, Lune flies into them as she always does. She wraps her arms around me. Her arms barely span my waist.

I tell her; “I am hopeful today. Very hopeful.”

I still have not heard from the friends I have called. Every night, their silence whispers something my ears cannot take hold of. Deceptive murmurings. This country of leering masses - all eyes, hands and mouths, grasping and feeding off graciousness - invokes paranoia.

My friends will call as soon as they are able to. They will.

I realize this must be one of those places I have heard about; where international phone calls are intercepted and deals struck before the intended, initial recipient is reached.

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A contact, Félicien who always knows even what he does not know, tells me that a list of génocidaires has been compiled and it is possible a name has been included. Kuseremane. Spelled out by a demure man, an aide he had said he was.

Soon we will be gone. To Europe, where the wind's weight of whispers do not matter; where wind, and all its suggestions have been obliterated.

Even as she stays in the room, Chi-Chi leaves us more often than ever, a fore-finger in her mouth. She has no filters. I worry that the soul of this place is soaking into her.

The city clock clicks above my head into the Two a.m. position. Rain has seeped into my bones and become ice. My knees burn. The rain water squelches in my feet. My Hugo Boss suit is ruined now, but I squeeze the water from the edges.

Club Balafon was a microcosm of home and the Zairoise band was nostalgic and superior. The band slipped into a song called "Chez Mama". The hearth of home. The women were beautiful and our laughter loud. It was good to taste good French cognac served in proper glasses. We lamented the fact that Kenyans are on the whole, so unchic.

And then René asked me where I was and what I was doing. I told him I needed his help, a loan. US\$ 5000, to be returned when things settle down back home. He listened and nodded and ordered for me a Kenyan beer named after an elephant. He turned to speak to Pierre who introduced him to Jean-Luc. I touched his shoulder to remind him of my request. He said in French: I will call you. He forgot to introduce me to Pierre and Jean-Luc. Two hours later, he said, in front of Pierre, Jean-Luc and Michel:

"Refresh my memory, who are you?"

My heart threatens to pound a way out of my chest. Then the band dredges up an old anthem of anguish, which, once upon a time, had encapsulated all our desires. Ingénues Francophones in Paris, giddy with hope. This unexpected evocation of fragile, fleeting, longings, drives me into an abyss of remembering.

'L'indépendance, ils l'ont obtenue/La table ronde, ils l'ont gagnée...'

Indépendance Cha-cha, the voice of Joseph Kabasellé.

Then, we were, vicariously, members of Kabasellé 's "Les Grand Kalle" . All of us, for we were bursting with dreams encapsulated in a song.

Now, at Balafon, the exiles were silent, to accommodate the ghosts of saints: Bolikango...Kasavubu..Lumumba...Kalondji...Tshombe...

I remember heady days in Paris; hair parted, like the statement we had become, horn rimmed glasses worn solely for aesthetic purposes, dark suited, black tied, dark skinned radicals moving in a cloud of enigmatic French colognes. In our minds and footsteps, always, the slow, slow, quick, quick slow, mambo to rumba, of Kabasellé's Indépendance Cha-cha.

'L'indépendance, ils l'ont obtenu...

La table ronde, ils l'ont gagnée...'

I dance at Club Balafon, my arms around a short girl who wears yellow braids. She is from Kenya and is of the opinion that 'Centro African' men are soooo good. And then the music stops. There can be no other footnote, so the band packs their musical tools, as quietly as we leave the small dance floor.

When I looked, René, Pierre, Jean-Luc, Michel and Emanuel were gone. Perhaps this was not their song.

"Which way did they go?" I ask the guard in black with red stripes on his shoulder. He shrugs. He says they entered into a blue Mercedes. Their driver had been waiting for them. He thinks they went to the Carnivore. It is raining as I walk back to River Road. Three fledglings are waiting for me, trusting that I shall return with regurgitated good news.

I am Boniface Kuseremane. Refresh my memory, who are you? There are places within, where a sigh can hide. It is cold and hard and smells of fear. In my throat something cries, "hrgghghg". I cannot breathe. And then I can. So I hum:



“Mhhhh...”

‘L’indépendance, ils l’ont obtenue...

It is odd, the sounds that make a grown man weep.

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I sleep and dream of whispers. They have crossed the borders and arrived in Nairobi. Like many passing snakes. Kuseremane. Kuseremane. Kuseremane . Kuseremane. Kuseremane.

But we left on the fifth day!

Now whenever I approach Kenyatta Avenue, they, my people, disperse. Or disappear into shops. Or avert their eyes. If I open a conversation, there is always a meeting that one is late for. Once on the street a woman started wailing like an old and tired train when she saw me. Her fingers extended, like the tip of a sure spear, finding its mark.

Kuseremane. Kuseremane. Kuseremane . Kuseremane. Kuseremane.

The whispers have found a human voice.

I can tell neither Agnethe-mama nor Chi-Chi nor Lune. I tell them to stay where they are; that the city is not safe.

Agnethe wants to know if the brother-monarchs-in-exile have sent their reply.

“Soon.” I say.

One morning, in which the sun shone pink, I found that a certain sorrow had become a tenant of my body and weighed it down on the small blue safari bed, at the end of which my feet hang. The sun has come into the room but it hovers above my body and cannot pierce the shadow covering my life. A loud knock on

the door, so loud the door shakes. I do not move so Lune glides to the door.

“Reo ni Reo, ni siku ya maripo. Sixi hundred ant sevente shirrings.” Kenyans and their shillings! The proprietor scratches his distended belly. His fly is undone and the net briefs he wears peek through. I want to smile.

Lune floats to my side, looks down at me. I shut my eyes. From the door a strangely gentle, “I donti af all dey.”

I open my eyes. Lune slips her hand into my coat pocket. How did she know where to look? She gives him the money, smiling as only she can. The proprietor thaws. He counts shillings. Then he smiles, a beatific grin.

I have shut my eyes again.

And then a hand, large, soft, warm strokes my face, my forehead. Silence, except for the buzzing of a blue fly. Agnethe-Mama is humming ‘Sur le Pont d’Avignon’. I used to fall asleep wondering how it was possible to dance on the Avignon bridge. Soon, we will know. When we leave.

I slept so deeply that when I woke up I thought I was at home in my bed and for a full minute I wondered why Roger had not come in with fresh orange juice, eggs and bacon, croissants and coffee. I wondered why mama was staring down at me, hands folded. Lune looks as if she has been crying. Here eyes are red rimmed. She has become thin, the bones of her neck jut out. Her fingers are no longer manicured. There! Chi-Chi. Her face has disappeared into her eyes which are large and black and deep. I look back at Agnethe-mama and see then that her entire hair front is grey. When did this happen?

“ We must register. As refugees. Tell UNHCR we are here.”

Now I remember that we are in Kenya; we are leaving Kenya soon. Am I a refugee?

“You slept the sleep of the dead, mon fils.”

Agnethe said, lowering the veil from her head. If only she knew how prophetic her words were. Being a princess once married to her prince, she would have been more circumspect. I have woken up to find the world has shifted, moved, aged and I with it. Today I will try to obtain work. There cannot be too many here who have a PhD in Diplomacy or a Masters in Geophysics. The immigration offices will advise me. In four days we will have been here three and a half months.

The sun is gentle and warm. The rain has washed the ground. Kenyans are rushing in all directions. A street child accosts me. I frown. He runs away and pounces on an Indian lady. Everybody avoids the child and the lady, rushing to secret fates. Destiny. Who should I meet at the immigration office but Yves Fontaine, a former college mate. We had been at the Sorbonne together. He was studying art but dropped out in the third year. We were drawn together by one of life's ironies. He was so white, so short, and so high voiced. I was so tall, so black and deep voiced. We became acquainted rather than friendly because it was a popular event to have the two of us pose for photographs together. It did not bother me. It did not bother him.

"Yves!"

"Boni-papa". His name for me. Boni-papa. We kiss each other three times on either cheek.

"It is inevitable we meet again?"

"It is inevitable."

"What are you doing here?"

"A visa renewal...I am chief technician for the dam in the valley."

"Ah, you did engineering?"

Yves shrugs, " Pfff. Non. It is not necessary here."

The sound of a stamp hitting the desk unnecessarily hard. A voice.

“Whyves Fontana.”

Yves changes his posture, his nose rises, he whose nose was always in the ground avoiding eyes so he would not be carried off by campus clowns.

“Ouais?” It is an arrogant Oui. The type of Oui Yves would never have tried at the Sorbonne.

“Your resident visa.”

Yves grabs his passport, swivels on his feet and exits. But first he winks at me.

“Next!” The voice shouts. I am next.

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From outside the window of a travel agency, on Kaunda street, a poster proclaims:

“Welcome to your own private wilderness”.

At the bottom of the poster; Nature close at hand: Walking safaris available. The picture in the foreground is that of a horse, a mountain and a tall, slender man wrapped in a red blanket, beads in his ears. It is all set within a watermark of the map of Kenya. I keep walking.

Beneath the steeple where the midday Angelus bells clang, I sit and watch the lunch time prayer crowds dribble into the Minor Basilica. The crowds shimmer and weave behind my eyelids.

The immigration officer demanded papers. He would not listen to me. I told him about my PhD and he laughed out loud. He said:

“Ati PhD. PhD gani? Wewe refugee, bwana!”

He whispers that he is compelled by Section 3(f) of the immigration charter to report my illegal presence. He cracks his knuckles. 'Creak' Crack.' He smiles quickly. Fortunately, all things are possible. The cost of silence is US\$ 500. I have 3000 shillings.

He took it all. But he returned 50 shillings for 'Bus fare'.

"Eh, your family...where are they?"

"Gone" I say.

"Si I'll see you next week? Bring all your documents...eh write your address here." A black book. Under 'name' I write René Katilibana. Address, Club Bala-fon. He watches every stroke of my pen.

A resumption of knuckle cracking. His eyes deaden into a slant.

"To not return...is to ask for the police to find you." He turns his head away. He calls:

"Next!"

I have used 5 shillings to buy small round green sweets from a mute street vendor. Good green sweets which calm hunger grumbles. A few more days and we will be leaving. I have resolved not to bother compiling a curriculum vitae.

I join the flow into the church, sitting at the back. Rhythm of prayer, intonation of priests; I sleep sitting before the altar of a God whose name I do not know.

Chi-Chi says;

"They laugh at themselves..."

"They are shy...they hide in noise...but they are shy."

Who?

“Kenya people.”

We must leave soon.

\*

We woke up early, Agnethe, Chi-Chi, Lune and I. walked to Westlands, forty five minutes walk away from our room just before River Road. We reached the gates of the UNHCR bureau at 10:00 a.m. We were much too late because the lists of those who would be allowed entry that day had been compiled. The rest of us would have to return the next day. We did, at 7:00 a.m. We were still too late because the lists of those who would be allowed entry had already been compiled. We returned at 4:00 a.m. But at 2:00 p.m. we discovered we were too late because the lists of those who would be allowed in had already been compiled. I decided to ask the guard at the gate, with long, black hair and an earring, a genuine sapphire.

“How can list be compiled? We are here for sree days.”

“New arrivals?,” he asks.

“Yes?”

“A facilitation fee is needed to help those who are compiling the list.”

“Facilitation fee?”

“Yes. That’s all.”

“And what is zis facilitation fee?”

“US\$ 200 per person.”

“And if one...he does not have US\$200?”

“Then unfortunately, the list is full.”

“But the UN...Sir?”

He raises his brow.

I told Lune and Chi-Chi. They told Agnethe. Agnethe covered her face and wailed. It is fortunate she wailed when a Television crew arrived. The Guard saw the television crew and realized that the list was not full. Five UN staffers wearing large blue badges appeared from behind the gate and arranged us into orderly lines, shouting commands here and commands there. Three desks materialized at the head of the queue as did three people who transferred our names and addresses into a large black book. After stamping our wrists we were sent to another table to collect our Refugee Registration Numbers. Chi-Chi returned briefly from her spirit realm to say:

“Is it not magical how so full a list becomes so empty in so short a time?”

\*

“Toa Kitambulisho!” I know this to be a request for identification. A policeman, one of three grunted to me. I shivered. I was standing outside the hotel building watching street vendors fight over plastic casings left behind by an inebriated hawker. I was smoking my fifth Sportsman cigarette in two hours.

“Sina.” I don’t have an identity card.

“Aya! Toa kitu kidogo”. I did not understand the code. Something small, what could it be? A cigarette. One each. It was a chilly evening. The cigarettes were slapped out of my hand. I placed my hand up and the second policeman said:

“Resisting arrest!”

A fourth one appeared and the second policeman said:

“Illegal alien...resisting arrest”.

They twisted my arm behind my back and holding me by my waistband, the trouser crotch cutting into me I was frog marched across town. Some people on the street laughed loudly, pointing at the tall man with his trouser lines stuck between the cracks of his bottom.

“Please...please chef...I’ll walk quietly” My hand is raised, palm up. “Please.”

Someone, the third one I think, swipes my head with a club. In a sibilant growl.

“Attempted escape.”

A litany of crimes.

“What’s your name?”

“I...I...” Silence. Again, I try. “I...I...I...”

“Aaaaaaa....aaaaii....eee.” It amuses them.

What is my name? I frown. What is my name?

I was once drinking a good espresso in a café in Breda, in the Netherlands with three European business contacts. Gem dealers. We were sipping coffee at the end of a well concluded deal. A squat African man wearing spectacles danced into the café. He wore a black suit, around his neck a grey scarf, in his hand a colorful and large bag, like a carpet bag. Outside it was cold. So easy to recall the feeling of well being a hot espresso evokes in a small café where the light is muted and the music a gentle jazz and there is a knowing that outside it is cold and grey and windy.

The squat African man grinned like an ingratiating hound, twisting and distorting his face, raising his lips and from his throat a thin high sound would emerge:

“Heee heee heee, heh heh heh.”



Most of the café turned back to their coffees and conversations. One man in a group of three put out his foot. The squat African man stumbled, grabbed his back to him. Rearranged himself and said to the man:

“Heee heee heee, heh heh heh.” He flapped his arm up and down. I wondered why, and then it dawned on me. He was simulating a monkey. He flapped his way to where I was, my acquaintances and I.

Sweat trickled down my spine. I think it was the heat in the café.

“What is your country of origin?” I ask him. Actually, I snarl the question at him and I am surprised by the rage in my voice.

He mumbles, his face staring at the floor. He lowers his bag, unzips it and pulls out ladies intimate apparel designed and colored in the manner of various African animals. Zebra, leopard, giraffe and colobus. There is a crocodile skin belt designed for the pleasure of particular sadomasochists. At the bottom of the bag a stack of posters and sealed magazines. Nature magazines? I think I see a mountain on one. I put out my free hand for one. It is not a mountain, it is an impressive arrangement of an equally impressive array of Black male genitalia. I let the magazine slide from my hand and he stoops to pick it up, wiping it against the sleeve of his black coat.

“Where are you from?” I ask in Dutch.

“Rotterdam.”

“No, man...your origin?”

“Sierra Leone.”

“Have you no shame?”

His head jerks up, his mouth opens and closes, his eyes meet mine for the first time. His eyes are wet. It is grating that a man should cry.

“Broda.” he savors the word. “Broda... its fine to see de eyes of anoda man...it is fine to see de eyes.”

Though his Dutch is crude, he read sociology in Leeds and mastered it. He is quick to tell me this. He has six children. His wife, Gemma is a beautiful woman. On a good day he makes 200 guilders, it is enough to supplement the Dutch state income and it helps sustain the illusions of good living for remnants of his family back home. He refuses to be a janitor, he tells me. To wear a uniform to clean a European toilet? No way. This is why he is running his own enterprise.

“I be a Business Mon.”

“Have you no shame?”

“Wha do ma childs go?”

“You have a master’s degree from a good University. Use it!”

Business man picks up his bags. He is laughing, so deeply, so low, a different voice. He laughs until he cries. He wipes his eyes.

“Oh mah broda...tank you for de laughing...tank you...you know... Africans we be overeducated fools. Dem papers are for to wipe our bottom. No one sees your knowing when you has no feets to stand in.”

He laughs again, patting his bag, smiling in reminiscence.

“My broda for real him also in Italy. Bone doctor. Specialist. Best in class. Wha he do now? Him bring Nigeria woman for de prostitute.”

Business man chortles.

“Maybe he fix de bone when dem break.”

I gave him 20 guilders.

“For the children.”

It was when Joop van Vuuren, the gem dealer idly, conversationally asked me what the business man’s name was that I remembered I had not asked and he had not told me.

In exile we lower our heads so that we do not see in the mirror of another’s eyes, what we suspect: that our precarious existence rests entirely on the whim of another’s tolerance of our presence. A phrase crawls into my mind: 'Psychic Oblation'. But what does it mean?

\*

“What is your name?”

I can smell my name. It is the smell of salt and the musk of sweat. It is... surprise...surprise...remembered laughter and a woman calling me “Chéri...” . I want to say...I want to say Yves Fontaine. As Yves Fontaine I would not be a vagrant immigrant, a pariah. As Yves Fontaine I would be ‘expatriate’ and therefore desirable. As Yves Fontaine I do not need an identity card.

“I...I...My...I....” Silence.

The sibilant hoarseness of the Superintendent:

“Unco-oparatif. Prejudising infestigesons.”

Agnethe-mama saw it happen. She had just raised her shawl to uncover her face so that she could shout at me to bring her some paracetamol for her headache. At first she thought she was reliving an old tale. Three men had arrived for her husband. She crawled up the stairs, lying low lest she be seen. Lune told me mama had sat on the bed rocking to and fro and moaning a song and whispering incantations she alone knew words to. In the four days I was away, making an unscheduled call on the Kenya Government, my mother’s hair deepened from grey to white. We did not know that her blood pressure began its ascent

that first day. Time, as she had always believed, would accomplish the rest.

It was at their station that the policemen found all manner of evidence in my pocket. All of which they liked and kept. After three days I was charged with 'loitering with intent'. At the crucial moment the proprietor turned up with my refugee registration card. My case was dismissed and I was charged to keep the peace.

Lune paid the Proprietor with her engagement ring. Whatever he had obtained from the sale of the ring caused him to put an arm around me, call me brother and drag me into a bar where he bought me three beers. He said, "Pole." Sorry.

He said we did not need to pay rent for three months. He wanted to know if we had any more jewelry to sell. I said no. He bought me another beer. He slides a note into my pocket before he leaves. A thousand shillings.

The UNCHR are shifting people out of Kenya, resettlement in third countries. Soon, it will be us. Agnethe-mama now wakes up in the night, tiptoes to my bed. When she sees it is me, she whispers:

"Mwami" My Lord.

Sunday is a day in which we breathe a little easier in this place. There are fewer policemen and diffident laughter hiding in hearts surface. It is simpler on Sunday to find our kind, my people in an African exile. We visit churches. Agnethe, Chi-Chi always go in. Lune sometimes joins them and sometimes joins me. I am usually seating beneath a tree, on a stone bench, walking the perimeter wall and if it is raining seating at the back of the church watching people struggling for words and rituals indicating allegiance to a God whose face they do not know. The hope peddlers become rich in a short while, singing, "Cheeeeeesus!". Even the devastated destitute will tithe to co-modified gods, sure in the theatrics of frothing messengers, hope is being dolled out. Investing in an eternal future? I do not have a coin to spare. Not now, maybe later, when all is quiet and normal, I will evaluate the idea of a Banker God created in the fearful image of man.

After church, to Agnethe's delight she found Maria. Maria and Agnethe used to shop in Paris together. Once they by-passed France and landed in Haiti. Maria's brother was an associate of Baby Doc's wife. They returned home unrepentant to their husbands and children; they treated their daring with the insouciance it deserved. It was fortunate Agnethe met Maria here because it was from Maria we learned that the Canadian government had opened its doors to those of us in Kenya.

Chi-Chi, emerged from her sanctuary to say "Bu-Bu...patterns of life... somewhere lines meet, non?"

A statement of fact. I am hopeful.

Maria was living well. Her brother had settled in Kenya years ago. His wife was from Kenya. Maria was with them.

"Is Alphonse with you?"

Agnethe, being a princess, had been unaware that after the two presidents had died, one never asked one's compatriots where so and so was. If one did not see so and so, one did not ask until the party spoken to volunteered the information of whereabouts. Alphonse was not with Maria. That was all Maria said. Even if Agnethe was a princess, because she was a princess in exile, she read nuances. She kept her mouth shut, and looked to the ground.

Maria's brother, Professor George and his wife and his two children were going to the Nairobi Animal Orphanage. Did we want to visit animals with them?

"Oh yes. Unfortunately...as you imagine...money is..."

"Don't worry, it is my pleasure," Professor George said.

So we went to meet animals. We met Langata the leopard who did not want people staring at him while he slept. Langata felt the intimacy of sleep is sacred and should be recognized as such. Apparently, he told Chi-Chi this. So Chi-Chi told us. Professor George glared at her. Chi-Chi refused to look at the animals.

Lune said animals lived behind fences to protect them from humans. Agnethemama was surprised to find that her dead prince did indeed look like a lion. She and Maria stared at Simba who stared back at them as if he knew he was being compared to a prince and the prince was increasingly found to be lacking.

“Why the name ‘Professor George’? I said to Professor George.

“They find it hard to say Georges Nsibiriwa.”

‘They’ were his wife’s people. I sensed the “and” So I said:

“And?”

Professor George walked quietly, he pointed out the difference between a Thomson gazelle and a Grant gazelle. Something about white posteriors. At a putrid pool, in which sluggish algae brewed a gross green soup, in between withered reeds and a hapless hyacinth, Professor George sighed and smiled. A dead branch, half-submerged, floated on the surface of the pool.

“Ah. Here we are...look...in the place you find yourself...in the time... camouflage!” A glorious pronouncement.

Surreptitious glance. Professor George then picks up a twig and throws it into the pond. From within the depths, what had been the dead branch, twisted up a surge of power. Its jaws snapped the twig in two; a white underbelly displayed before transforming itself, once again into a dead branch, half-submerged, floating on the surface of the pool.

“Ah! See ! Camouflage... place dictates form, mon ami. Always.”

I start to tell him about the police.

Professor George nods; “Yes...yes...it is the time.” And he asks if I have heard word from Augustine, a mutual friend who lives in Copenhagen.

“Augustine has changed address, it seems.”

Professor George says: "Yes... it is the time."

I need to ask something. "You have heard about the list?" He looks up at me, his face a question.

"Les génocidaires?"

"Ah yes...but I pay no attention."

The relief of affirmation. A name's good can be invoked again. So I tell him, "Ah! It's difficult, mon ami, and ...Agnethe-mama doesn't know."

"Know what?"

"Our name is on the list."

With the same agility that the crocodile used to become a log again, Professor George pulls away from the fence. He wipes his hand, the one I had shaken, against his shirt. He steps away, one step at a time, then He turns around and trots, like a donkey, shouting, looking over his shoulder at me:

"Maria! We leave...now!"

The first lesson of exile - camouflage. When is a log...not a log? When a name is not a name.

\*

On Monday we were outside the UNHCR at 4:30 a.m. We hope that the list is not full. It is not. Instead there is a handwritten sign leading to an office of many windows which says 'Relocations, Resettlement.' At the front, behind the glass are three men and two women with blue badges which say UNHCR. They have papers in front of them. Behind them, four men, a distance away. They watch us

all, their bodies still. I straighten my coat and stand a little taller.

We are divided into two groups, men and women: The women are at the front. The women are divided into three groups: Young Girls, Young Women, Old Women.

At the desks, where there is a desk sign which says "Records Clerk" they write out names and ages, previous occupation and country of origin and of course, the RRN- refugee registration number. Those who do not have an RRN must leave, obtain one in room 2004 and return after two weeks.

Later, flash! And a little pop. Our faces are engraved on a piece of paper. Passport photograph. Movement signified, we are leaving.

"Next", the photographer says. Defiance of absence. Photographer, do you see us at all? In articulation as defense. Let it pass. Soon, we will be gone from this place.

The Young women are commanded to hand over babies to the Old Women. Young Girls and Young Women are taken into another room. A medical examination we are informed. We are told to wait outside the office block, the gate. Perhaps we will be examined another day.

Agnethe-mama and I are sitting on a grassy patch opposite a petrol station. Agnethe, bites at her lips. Then her tugs my sleeve.

"Bonbon...do other monarchs in exile live in Canada?"

"Perhaps."

Chi-Chi and Lune emerge, holding hands. It is two hours later and the sun is hovers, ready to sink into darkness. They do not look at either of us. We walk back, silently. Chi-hi has hooked her hand into my waistband. Lune glides ahead of us all, her stride is high, the balance of her body undisturbed. A purple matatu, its music "thump thumping" slows down and a tout points north with a hand gesture. I decline. It speeds off in a series of "thump thumps". Agnethe



frowns. We walk in silence. Long after the matatu has gone, Agnethe says, her face serene again:

“The reason they are like that...these Kenyans...is because they do not know the cow dance.”

\*

When Lune dipped her hand into my coat pocket while I slept and took out eight hundred shillings, returning in an hour with a long mirror, I should have listened to the signal from the landscape.

Chi-Chi used Lune's mirror to cut her hair. She cut it as if she were hacking a dress. She stepped on and kicked her shom locks. Agnethe-mama covered her mouth, she said nothing as if she understood something. For Lune, the mirror evokes memories of ballet technique. She executes all her movements with her legs rotated outward. Agnethe-mama looks to the mirror so she can turn away and not look.

Two weeks later, I kick the mirror down. I smash it with my fists. They bleed. Agnethe screamed once, covering her mouth. Silence enters our room. Silence smells of the Jevanjee Garden roasted Kenchic chicken; one pack feeds a frugal family of four for three days.

On the third day, I find Lune looking down at me.

“It was mine. It was mine.” She smiles suddenly and I am afraid.

From across the room, Agnethe-mama; “Ah Bonbon...still... no word from the Kings in exile?”

The anger with which the rain launches itself upon this land, the thunder which causes floors to creak sparks a strange foreboding in me. That night, while we were eating cold beans and maize dinner, Lune pushed her plate aside, looked at me, a gentle, graceful crane, her hands fluttering closed, a smile in her eyes.

“Chéri, we can leave soon, but it depends on a certain...co-operation.”

“Co-operation?”

“A condition from the medical examination.”

Agnethe looks away. Chi-Chi ditches her body, staving off in her way something she is afraid of.

“How do we co-operate?” I am afraid to know.

“By agreeing to be examined”, she laughs, high, dry, cough-laugh, “...examined by the officials at their homes for a night.”

“I see.”

I don't. Silence. Agnethe is rocking herself to and fro. She is moaning a song. I know the tune. It is from the song new widows sing when the body of their dead spouse is laid on a bier.

Annals of war decree that conquest of landscapes is incomplete unless the vanquisher's women are 'taken'. Where war is crudest, the women are discarded, afterwards for their men to find. Living etchings of emasculation. Lune has not finished yet. I sense I am being taunted for my ineffectuality by this woman who would be my wife.

“Now... it has been discussed with family, it is not a question of being forced.”

A recitation. I lower my head. The incongruity of tears. A persistent mosquito buzzes near my ear. The food on my plate is old. Lune leaves the table, pushing back her chair, she places her feet in a parallel arrangement, one in front of the other, the heel of a foot in line with the toes of the other. Her right arms extends in front of her body, and the left is slightly bent and raised. She moves the weight of her body over the left foot and bends the left knee. She raises her right heel, pointing the toe. Her body is bent toward the extended knee. She holds the pose and says;

“Pointe tendue!”

Conscious now, I read the gesture. She will perform as she must, on this stage. I can only watch.

“No.”

Now Chi-Chi raises her head, like a beautiful cat. I know the look; tentative hope, tendrils reaching out and into life. Lune closes her feet, the heel of one now touching the toes of the other; she pushes up from the floor and jumps, her legs straight, feet together and pointed. She lands and bows before me. Then she cracks and cries, crumbling on the floor.

Outside, the window, the drone of traffic which never stops and the cackle of drunkards. Creeping up the window a man’s voice singing:

“Chupa na debe. Mbili kwa shilling tano. Chupa na debe”

Bottle and tin, two for five shillings, bottle and tin, Kenyans and their shillings.

\*

I stood on the balcony staring at the traffic, counting every red car I could see. Nine so far. Behind me, Agnethe approached. In front of my face she dangled her wedding ring.

“Sell it.”

“No.”

She let it fall at my feet.

We used the money to leave the room on River road. We went to a one roomed cottage with a separate kitchen and an outside toilet. It was in Hurlingham, the property of a former Government secretary, Mr. Wamathi, a drinking acquaint-

ance of the proprietor. I observed that his gardening manners were undeveloped; he had subdivided his quarter acre plot, cutting down old African olive trees and uprooting the largest bougainvillea I had ever seen, on the day we arrived. He was going to put up a block of flats. Mr. Wamathi was delirious with glee about selling the trees to the "City Canjo" for fifteen thousand shillings. His laughter was deep, rounded and certain with happiness.

He laughed and I felt hope joining us.

Agnethe started tending a small vegetable patch. Her eyes gleamed when the carrot tops showed. Lune made forays into a nearby mall, an eye-fest of possibilities satiating her heart, extending her wants. Chi-Chi, over the fence, befriended an Ethiopian resident who introduced her to his handsome brother, Matteo.

The day Chi-Chi met Matteo she slipped her hand into my waist-band, looking up at me she said:

"He...can...see..."

Every day I tried to contact home, seeking cash for four air tickets on a refugee pass. Word appeared in dribs and drabs. Detail gleaned from conversations heard, strangers approached and newspapers slyly read.

The bank? Bumed down. The money? Missing from the safes. And once, the sound of a name accused, accursed:

Kuseremane.

But hadn't we left on the fifth day?

The day flows on. I sit in different cafés, telling the waiters that I am waiting for a friend. Thirty minutes in some cafes. In the more confident ones, the ones which are sure of their identity, I can wait for a full hour before I make a face, glance at my non-existent watch, frown as if tardy friends are a source of annoyance and I exit.

Whispers had floated over the land of hills and nestled in valleys and refused to leave, had in fact given birth to volleys of sound. Now tales had been added of a most zealous servant instructed by an heir to sluice stains.

“Ah! Roger. Mon oncle...”

Excoriating women’s wombs, crushing fetal skulls, following the instructions of a prince.

They said.

Today I woke up as early as the ones who walk to work maneuvering the shadows of dawn, crochet covered radios against ears, in pockets, or tied to bicycle saddles. Sometimes music, Rumba. And in the dawn dark I can forget where I am and let others’ footsteps show me the way. I hear Franklin Bukaka’s plea, pouring out of so many radios, tenderly carried in so many ways.

‘Aye! Afrika, O! Afrika...’.

I return from so many journeys like this and one day, I find Agnethe-mama lying on her back in her vegetable patch. At first I think she is soaking up the sun. Then I remember Agnethe-mama never let the sun touch her skin. An African princess, melanin management was an important event of toilette. I lean over her body. Then, head against her chest, I cannot hear a heartbeat.

I carry my mother and run along the road. The evening traffic courses past. Nairobi accommodates. Room for idiosyncrasies. So to those pass by, it is not strange that a tall, tall man should carry a slender woman in his arms.

At the first hospital. “My mother...she is not heart beating...help.”

“Kshs 12,000 deposit, Sir.”

“But my mother...”

“Try Kenyatta.”

At Kenyatta, they want a four thousand shilling deposit and I will still have to wait, one of about three hundred people waiting for two doctors to see them. I do not have four thousand shillings.

“Where can I go?”

“Enda Coptic.” Go to the Copts.

“Tafadhali...please, where are they?”

“Ngong Rd”

“How far?”

“Next!”

\*

Agnethe sighs, opens her eyes and asks:

“Have the monarchs-in-exile sent our reply yet, Bonbon?”

“Soon...mama.”

She has suffered a mild stroke.

I return to the cottage to pack a bag for mama. Exile blurs lines. So a son, such as I can handle a mother's underwear. Agnethe-mama told Chi-Chi once, in my hearing, that all in a woman may fall apart, may become unmatched, but never her underwear. I place sets of underwear for Agnethe; black, brown and Lacy purple.

\*

Kuseremane, Kuseremane, Kuseremane.

It seems that the whispers have infringed upon the place where my tears hide. I cannot stop bawling, sniveling like a lost ghou. My shoulders bounce with a life of their own. Lune watches me, her eyes veiled in a red, feral glow.

At six p.m. I rejoin a river of workers returning to so many homes. To be one of many, is to be, anyway, if only for a moment. The sun is setting and has seared into the sky a golden trail; it has the look of a machete wound bleeding yellow light. It is an incongruous time to remember Roger's blackened hands.

Agnethe has taken to sitting in the garden rocking her body, to and fro, to and fro. She does not hum. But sometimes, in between the fro and to, she asks:

"Have the brother sovereigns sent a letter?"

"Soon."

At night, Chi-Chi shakes me awake, again. My pillow is soaked, my face wet. Not my tears.

The next morning, I left the cottage before sunrise. I have learned of hidden places; covered spaces which the invisible inhabit. The Nairobi Arboretum. The monkeys claim my attention as do the frenzied moaning of emptied people calling out to frightened gods for succor. Now, it starts to rain. I walk rapidly, then start to jog, the mud splattering my already stained coat. The other hidden place is through the open doors of a Catholic Church. Hard wooden benches, pews upon which a man may kneel, cover his eyes and sleep or cry unheeded before the presence that is also an absence.

\*

My return coincides with Mr. Wamathi's winding his way into the house. He rocks on his feet:

"Habe new yearghh." 'Year' ends with a burp and belch.

“Happy New Year.” It is July and cold and time is relative.

Agnethe outside, uncovered. Rocking to and fro. She clutches thin arms about herself, shivering.

“Aiiee, mama!” I lean down to lift her up.

“Bonbon, il fait froid, oui?” It is cold.

“Lune? Chi-Chi? Lune?” Why is mama sitting out in the night alone.

“Oú est Lune...Chi-Chi, mama?”

Agnethe stares up at the sky, from my arms.

“Bonbon... il fait froid.” Two anorexic streams glide down, past high cheekbones and nestle at the corner of her mouth. She looks up and into my eyes. The resolute eyes of an ancient crone. Now...now the cold’s tendrils insinuate themselves, searing horror in my heart.

Chi-Chi returned first. She stumbled through the door, her body shuddering. She is wiping her hand up and down her body, ferociously, as if wiping away something foul only she can sense.

“Everything has a pattern...Bu-Bu, non?” She gives me the folded papers.

Three laissez-passez. Tickets to rapture. Let them pass. It favors Agnethe, Boniface and Chi-Chi Kuseremane.

I am not there.

I watch from afar, the ceiling I think, as the tall man tears the papers to shreds. I am curious about the weeping woman with shorn hair crawling on the ground gathering the fragments to her chest. I frown when I see the tall, dark man lift his hand up, right up and bring it crashing into the back of the girl who falls to the



floor, lies flat on her belly and stops crying. She is staring into herself where no one else can reach her. A sound at the door. The tall, tall man walks up to his fiancée. Who bows low, the end of a performance. She too has a clutch of papers in her hand. The tall man sniffs the girl as if Lune as if he were a dog and he bites her on the cheek, the one upon which another man's cologne lingers. Where the teeth mark are, the skin has broken. Drops of blood. Lune laughs.

"We can leave anytime now."

"Putaine!"

She giggles.

"But I shall live, Chéri...we shall live...we shall live well."

Agnethe—mama heaves herself up from the bed and brushes her long white hair. I return to the body of the tall, black man whose arms are hanging against his side, his head bowed. He sees that Lune feet are close, the heel of one touching the toes of the other. She slowly raises hands over her head, paper clutched in the right, she rounds her arms slightly, en couronne-in a crown.

Paper fragments, a mosaic on the floor. I stoop, the better to stare at them. I pick up my sister. She is so still. But then she asks, eyes wide with wanting to know: "Bu-Bu...there's a pattern in everything. Oui?"

"Oui, Ché- Ché." A childhood name, slips easily out of my mouth. Now when she smiles, it reaches her eyes. She touches my face with her hand.

\*

That night, or more accurately, the next morning, it was three a.m. Agnethe went to the bathroom outside. Returning to the room she had stepped into and slid in a puddle. She stepped out again to clean her feet and then she screamed and screamed and screamed.

"Ahh! Ahh! Ahhhee!"

She points at the rag upon which she has wiped her feet. It is covered in fresh blood. She points into the room, at the floor. I return to look. Lune is now awake. Lights in the main house are switched on and Mr Wamathi appears on the doorway, a knobkerrie in his hand.

“Where, where?” He shouts.

The neighbourhood dogs have started to howl. The sky is clear and lit up by a crescent moon. I remember all this because I looked up as I carried my bleeding sister, my Chi-Chi-Ché-Ché into Mr Wamathi’s car, cushioned by towels and blankets while her blood poured out.

At the hospital emergency wing where we had been admitted quickly, a tribute to Mr. Wamathi’s threats, I watched the splayed legs of my sister, raised and striped. My sister, led to and stripped bare in the wilderness of lives altered when two presidents were shot to the ground from the sky. I remember a blow bestowed on a back by a defenseless brother-prince.

How can a blow be unsung?

A doctor and a nurse struggle to bring to premature birth a child we did not know existed. Chi-Chi’s eyes are closed. Her face still. When she left us moment she went. I felt a tug on my waist band as in days of life and her body lost its shimmer, as if a light within had gone off for good. She left with her baby.

The child’s head was in between her legs. A boy or girl, only the head was visible and one arm, small fists slightly open as if beckoning. Skin like cream coffee. The offspring of African exiles. An enigma solved. The Ethiopians had abruptly disappeared from the radar of our lives and Chi-Chi had said nothing. The dying child of African exiles in an African land. I stroked the baby’s wet head. Did baby come to lure Chi-Chi away? A word shimmers into my heart; fratricide. I douse it with the coldness of my blood. I am shivering. A distant voice...mine.

“Leave them...leave the children.” Keep them together... the way they are.

Landscape speaks. The gesture of an incomplete birth. Of what have we to be afraid? Metamorphoses of being. There must be another way to live.

“Is there a priest?” Even the faithless need a ritual to purge them off the unsailable scent of mystery.

“What shall we do with the body?”

A body...my sister. When did a pool of blood become this...absence? They let me cover her face after I have kissed her eyes shut.

Vain gesture.

Agnethe and Lune are outside, waiting. Islands in their hope. I open the door to let them in, gesturing with my hand. They step into the room and I step out. I let the door close behind me and try to block out the screams emanating from within. Staccato screams. Screams in a crescendo and then a crushing moan.

A nurse offers forms to be filled in.

“Nairobi City Mortuary.”

It will cost Eight thousand Kenya shillings to rent space for Chi-Chi. I do not have eight thousand shillings. Its OK, the nurse says. I can pay it tomorrow at the mortuary.

Eeeh! Kenyans and their shillings.

Nurse turns; “Pole.” Sorry.

But Mr. Wamathi makes an arrangement with his wives, and they find 35,000 shillings for Agnethe.

Is this it?

Later. After all the bluster of being...this? A body in a box, commended to the soil.

A brother's gesture: 12 torches alight in a sister's cheap coffin. Chi-Chi and her Nameless One will see in the dark.

\*

It is a challenge to match paper fragments so that they match just right. It is fortunate there are words on the paper, it makes it easier. Three laisses-passez's. Chi-Chi's is complete, almost new.

Lune returned to my bed. Agnethe's resumed her rocking which accelerated in both speed and volume. Her eyes are brown and a ceaseless rivulet of tears drips onto her open palm. But she smiles at us, Lune and I, and does not utter a word. Sometimes her eyes have a film of white over them as if she had become a medium, in constant communion with the dead. Sometimes I imagine that they look at me with reproach. I look to the ground; the quest for patterns.

I have lost the feeling of sleep. I will not touch Lune nor can I let her touch me. It is the ghost of another man's cologne which lingers in my dreams and haunts my heart. I am bleeding in new places. But we are leaving.

"Bu-Bu, everything has a pattern, non?"

We will be leaving for Canada on Saturday night.

Agnethe shocked us by dying on Friday morning in my arms as I entered the gates of the Coptic hospital. On the streets, as before, no one found it strange, the idea of a tall, tall man carrying a slender woman in his arms. A pattern had been established, a specific madness accommodated.

When Agnethe-mama left, the energy of her exit made me stumble.

"Ah! Bonbon! Ah !" She says.

At the Coptic gate, “Mwami!”

She leaves with such force, her head is thrown back against my arms.

Agnethe-mama.

The Copts cannot wrench her from my arms. They let me sit in their office and rock my mother to and fro, to and fro. I am humming a song. It is the melody of ‘Sur le pont d’Avignon’ where we shall dance.

At the cottage, old bags with few belongings are packed. On the bed, a manila bag with Agnethe’s clothes, the bag she was packing when her body crumbled to the ground.

“Où est maman?” Lune asks. Where is mama?

I stretch out my arms and she, lifts her hand to her long silk hair and draws it away from her face. She rushes into my arms and burrows her face into my shoulder.

“Forgive me.”

We do what we can to live. Even the man whose cologne stayed on her face. I have no absolution to give. So I tell, her, instead that Agnethe has just died. And when Lune drops to the ground like a shattered rock, I slap her awake, harder than necessary on the cheek upon which another man’s cologne had strayed and stayed. She does not move, but her eyes are open. Arms above her head, hair over her face.

She smirks. “I’m leaving. I am living.”

She grabs my arm, a woman haunted by the desire for tomorrow where all good is possible. “I am leaving.”

“Ma mère...Lune-chérie.”

Lune covers her ears, shuts her eyes.

For the most fleeting of moments, I enter into her choice. To slough the skin of the past off. To become another life form. I look around the room. Agnethe-mama's slippers by the bed. What traces have they left on the surface of the earth? The gossip of landscape. It is getting clear. I stoop low and kiss Lune on her forehead. In the pattern of things, there is a place in which the body of a princess may rest. Isn't there?

A Coptic priest, a Coptic doctor, Lune and I, Mr, Mrs and Mrs Wamathi- the sum total of those gathered around Agnethe-mama's. Lune's airplane bags are over her shoulders, her plane ticket in her purse. In four hours time she will be in a plane taking her to the Canada of her dreams. We forgot grave-diggers must be paid, their spades attached to Kenya shillings. So I will cover my mother's grave myself, when the others are gone.

A plane departs from Nairobi. Kenya Airways to London. From London, Air Canada to Ottawa.

I have been laughing for an hour now. True, the laughter is interspersed with hot, sour, incessant streams of tears. Squatting on my mother's grave. The unseen now obvious.

Life peering out of lives. Life calling life to dance. Life, the voyeur.

I will start dancing now.

'L'indépendance, ils l'ont obtenue/La table ronde, ils l'ont gagnée...'

'Mhhhh...Mhhhh...Mhh...Mhh...Mhhhh'

'L'indépendance, ils l'ont obtenue...'

Kabasellé laughs.

Who can allay the summon of Life to life? The inexorable attraction for Fire. The

soul knows its keeper. Inexorable place, space and pace. I see. I see.

There!

Life aflame in a fire- gold sun. And dust restoring matter to ash. The ceaseless ardour for life now required:

'Mhhhh...Mhhhh...Mhh...Mhh...Mhhhh.'

'L'indépendance, ils l'ont obtenue...'

La table ronde, ils l'ont gagnée...'

'Cha-cha-cha!'

Thus begun the first day of my second life.