

# ABSINTHE

WORLD LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

VIBRATE!

*Resounding the Frequencies of Africana  
in Translation*

A selection by Frieda Ekotto, Imani Cooper Mkandawire, and Xiaoxi Zhang

26

# ABSINTHE

WORLD LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

V I B R A T E !

*Resounding the Frequencies of Africana  
in Translation*

Editors : Frieda Ekotto, Imani Cooper, Xiaoxi Zhang

26

*ABSINTHE: World Literature in Translation* is published twice a year by the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan.

*ABSINTHE: World Literature in Translation* receives the generous support of the following schools, offices and programs at the University of Michigan: Rackham Graduate School, Office of the Vice Provost for Global and Engaged Education, International Institute, and the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures.

Typesetting and Design

William Kalvin, Delmas Typesetting. Ann Arbor, Michigan [delmastype.com](http://delmastype.com)

Printed at McNaughton & Gunn. Saline, Michigan

ISBN: 978-1-60785-578-1

ISSN: 1543-8449

[sites.lsa.umich.edu/absinthe](http://sites.lsa.umich.edu/absinthe)

Follow us on Twitter: @AbsintheJournal

Unless otherwise noted, all contents copyright © 2019 *Absinthe: World Literature in Translation* and the Department of Comparative Literature, University of Michigan.

**ABSINTHE**

*World Literature in Translation*

Dwayne Hayes  
Founding Editor

Silke-Maria Weineck  
Editor-in-Chief

Yopie Prins  
Chair of Comparative Literature  
at the University of Michigan — Publisher

Judith Gray  
Administrator

Elisabeth Fertig  
Graham Liddell  
Genta Nishku  
Managing Editors



## ABSINTHE 26

vii Acknowledgements

1 Introduction

### **Kagayi Ngobi**

11 *Oluzungu Lumbe, English Language Is Death! |  
No Speaking Vernacular*

### **Moses Kilolo**

37 *Kimwana Kithini Nikyalika Kivinduni, An Immortal  
Precariat Goes into the Night*

### **Abdilatif Abdalla**

59 *Kuno Kunena, Speaking Out | Telezi, Slipperiness |  
Kibaruwa, Casual Laborer | Ungapomoka, Although It  
Has Fallen*  
Translated by Kelly Askew and Abdilatif Abdalla

### **Reem Bassiouney**

71 *“رسالة الى السيد ”ف“, Letter to Mr. “F” | بطاطس مقالية, French  
Fries | حتى الساعة السابعة, Until Seven o’Clock*  
Translated by Xiaoxi Zhang

### **Nyambura Mpesha**

89 *M-Diag | Nani?, Who?*

### **Mukoma Wa Ngugi**

97 *Kidane-Diva “Come See the Other Me,” from We Sing the  
Tizita to Unbury Our Dead with Song*

### **Frieda Ekotto**

107 *L’Art de Regarder: Une Lettre de Frieda Ekotto à Frida  
Khalo, The art of looking: A letter to Frida Kahlo from  
Frieda Ekotto*  
Translated by Emily Goedde

- Susan Kiguli**  
123 *Omuti, The Tree | Nnakazzadde, Mother | Wayirindi,*  
*The Plague | The Unending Game, Omuzannyo Ogutakoma*  
Translated by Merit Kabugo
- Afua Ansong**  
135   
“The Earth Is Heavy/Holds Weight” | “Drum”  
“Ananse’s Web”
- Mary Pena**  
141 *Rescripting Visual Codes: A Poetic Translation*
- Elizabeth Mputu**  
153 *Charcoal Toothpaste*
- Imani Cooper Mkandawire**  
165 *Inheritance, Ode to N”TOO*
- 175 Contributors

## Acknowledgements

The editorial team of *Vibrate!* would like to express great appreciation to the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies and the Centre for African Studies for their generous donation to this issue of *Absinthe*. We also wish to thank Kelly Askew, Stephanie Bosch Santana, and Simon Gikandi for advising us towards your networks of brilliant translators, writers, and scholars. Uhuru Phalafala, we value the time you spent conceptualizing *Vibrate!* in its initial phases. Your expansive and imaginative understanding of Africanity in translation was inspirational. Thank you Emily Goedde for reading our translations. And thank you to everyone who shared our spirit, and who have been supporting us generously in other, yet equally important ways.

This is for you.





## Introduction

The idea for this journal issue began with an interest in publishing works written in “local languages” in Africa, because when we talk about African literature today, we mostly are concerned with African authors who write in European languages (English, French, German, Portuguese, Italian and Spanish). Since African literature and its aesthetics are also translations of European languages, it is important to return to seminal works such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) and Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950). These texts analyze the struggle for language in Africans’ right to humanity. For wa Thiong’o, the call for the rediscovery and the revalorization of African languages remains a process of decolonizing history. The new way to think about African history is to re-read it or to take it to new expanses. For Césaire, colonial discourse dehumanizes the African, hence the need to seize oneself as a historical subject, for it is through language that one transmits culture. The key question then becomes: What culture are we transmitting right now?

We have contributions in colonial languages including French and English because we fundamentally believe that these languages are African languages. The Chadian writer Nimrod calls for the need to make French an African language. In *La Nouvelle Chose française*, he writes: “it is time we consider French an African language.”<sup>1</sup> Since it is impossible to write in Dìala, her mother tongue, Frieda Ekotto decided to write her piece in her colonial language as a process of decolonization.

Perhaps it is time we expand translation theory to discuss African literature. An African writer’s imagination moves from creolized languages and cultures to a European language. In this sense, we cannot talk about African literature without translation. We need

---

<sup>1</sup>Nimrod. *La Nouvelle Chose française*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2008. p. 27.

to reconceptualize the notion of “translation” while acknowledging that European languages have already become a venue for African expressions.

It is hard, if not impossible, to engage with the question of language in African literature without a critical sense of the impact of European colonialism on the continent.

Many consider the “Scramble for Africa” that followed the now infamous Berlin Conference in 1884–85 to be the culmination of European colonialism in the continent. While in 1870, only around ten percent of the African territory was formally under the control of the Europeans, in less than half a century, by 1914, only ten percent of the territory remained in the hands of the Africans. However, such a view presumes a totalizing perspective toward the continent from the outside, which often alienates one from the concrete daily experiences of colonialism associated with the continent.

Indeed, due to the arbitrariness of colonial division of the continent, and the varied experiences and practices of the Europeans in the African continent across centuries, people from different geographical areas or historical moments have varied experiences of “colonialism.” In the realm of linguistic practice, although it is known that the colonial policy of indirect rule, adopted by the British and the Germans, and the corresponding linguistic practice of adaptation varied drastically from the policies of the French and the Portuguese, who preferred a more direct approach that imposes the languages of the colonizers as the only recognized official language in public domains and formal practices. It should be highlighted that the degree of implementation of their policies also varied significantly from region to region and in different historical periods, both as a result of domestic resistance of culturally and socially distinct local communities and as a result of the shift of immediate interests of the colonial metropolises.

Take the example of Kiswahili. Despite being recognized as a compelling example of an African language, one cannot take for granted the indigeneity of the language to its users in the continent without also considering the arbitrary employment of the language by the German and British colonizers for regional administrative purposes. Resistance to the use of the language was registered when-

ever the regulated use of the Swahili language implicated inequality and subordination to an imposed social hierarchy, which constituted a dynamic factor the colonial government had to consider in the evaluation of its language policy. When the colonial government no longer invested heavily in the Swahili language and decided to encourage direct use of a European language, Swahili was also voluntarily taken up by many speakers who, despite their varied relationships with the language, made use of it due to its status as a regional lingua franca for effective communication in the midst of anti-imperial struggles.

The history of the standardization and the promotion of Swahili under colonial governments also engenders a coerced separation between Arabic and the African continent, or at least between a limited profile of the “Arabic language” and part of the African continent, as it was created in the minds of the colonizers. If, in the case of the Swahili-speaking regions, “de-arabization” and the forced adoption of the Latin script can be understood as a noble gesture of the restoration of an authentic “Bantu” culture free from the contamination of the external forces of the Arabs, such an interpretation would hardly sound reasonable if one takes into account the various Arabic-speaking communities in the continent, and the fact that they were all negatively affected by European imperialism and still suffer from the consequences of it. The various layers of experiences of “colonialism,” which also go together with different kinds of policies, on the other hand, call for an expanded understanding of colonialism capable of accommodating the miscellaneous oppressive experiences that forcefully tied a whole continent together.

It is crucial to understand the impact of colonialism for a critical appreciation of works written in African languages, not because European civilization succeeded in reshaping the African continent according to its own interests, but because in every possible moment, the Africans were always readily disposed to turn the imposed cultural elements into weapons of resistance, to the extent that any non-historical affirmation of the cultural identity of a language as being “African” runs the risk of falling into a problematic trap of authenticity that bears imperial connotations alienated from reality experienced in Africa. To this effect, Chidi Amuta, in *The Theory of*

*African Literature*, calls for a more comprehensive understanding of the question of language in African literature to effectively carry the revolutionary spirit and ideological pursuits of everyone from the continent who advocated the use of local languages as an anti-colonial gesture:

Literary creativity and consumption in each African country is simultaneously taking place in both the European and African languages. While the bulk of oral literary creativity is being carried out in African languages in the rural areas, much of written literature is done in European languages. African literature written in English, French, and Portuguese exists alongside a growing tradition of written literature in Yoruba, Igbo, Gikuyu and Xosa. Given this spectacle, to insist that African literature be created exclusively in either of these sets of languages is to ignore the social and historical predication of the language situation itself. Even if all of African literature were suddenly to be created in African language without due attention to the ideological content of the literature and its relationship with its audience, the revolutionary dreams of the advocates of linguistic indigenization would be thwarted.

If literature *qua* literature is to play its sectoral role as a cultural force in the transformation of society, then the language question needs to be redefined in more pragmatic terms. The problem, to my mind, is not that of language in the sense of verbal signification—that is, European vs. African—but rather that of strategies for cultural communication in a neo-colonial situation. In effect, language needs to be reconceptualized to mean the totality of the *means* available for communicating a cultural form to the greatest majority in a manner that will achieve a clearly defined cognitive–ideological effect in the consciousness of the audience so defined. [ . . . ]

Language *qua* language is therefore not the issue in African literature. The problem of communication in our literature is directly related to the forces that prevent human communica-

tion at the economic and social levels. As part of the struggle to correct this anomaly, all the avenues of cultural communication should be explored to get the benefit of progressive revolutionary literature across to the greatest possible majority of our peoples. In this respect, European languages, African languages, oral performance, written expression, radio broadcasts, etc. are implicated.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the “language question” in African literature inevitably entails the procedure of bridging the gap between socio-economic development in the post-colonial era, which still demands heavy use of European languages for practical purposes, and dignified cultural recognition free from the oppressive burdens of colonialism. At the same time, productive discussions about the language of African literature should also serve as the hub of communications for anti-imperial endeavors in every sense at different levels.

This understanding also leads to a renewed understanding of the place of a translation. In his famous essay “Des Tours de Babel,” Jacques Derrida calls into question the hierarchy between the original and the translation and draws attention to the quality of both the original and the translation within each individual context. In African contexts, translation from or into a local tongue is often predicated upon one’s sensitivity to the socio-historical conditions that shape one’s understanding of language, as well as an active attempt towards liberation. The translation, on the other hand, should also be read as a hybrid cultural and social rendering of the spirit of the original drawn from “all the avenues of cultural communication” for the sake of cross-cultural transcendence and liberation, instead of a word-for-word rendering from an “original” based on a conventional linguistic or stylistic framework.

In addition to reading for the stylistic challenges towards the notion of a language per se and the limitations of a specific genre as understood by many, it is also worth mentioning that there are more than fifty recognized countries in Africa, and among which no less than twenty-four countries take English as their official language for

---

<sup>2</sup>Amuta, Chidi. *The Theory of African Literature*. London: Zed Books, 1989. p. 112.

various reasons. In addition, there is also a big population of African descent living in the diaspora, among whom many have English or another non-African local language either as their first language, or as a language of substantial importance in different capacities. Even if what we are able to cover in this issue is only a very small part of the literary and artistic productions related to language and Africa, we are still feeling short of space to do justice to the context each specific piece entails. Therefore, we invite the readers to read imaginatively, and also to look for the reason and the value of the linguistic varieties associated to the use of one single language, as well as the relationship between the writer and a language.

Outside of language-based notions of translation, and recognized in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, translation also denotes “the expression or rendering of something in another medium or form.”<sup>3</sup> The Chicago School of Media Theory considers how language- and non-language-based modes of translation can be understood in relation, specifically how each “offer different orientations of a similar process: the first describing a change of form within a medium, viz. language; while the latter describes a process that is enacted between media.”<sup>4</sup> However, this issue of *Absinthe* considers yet another definition of translation, one that encompasses both intra-medium and inter-media processes: translation defined as “transformation, movement, shift.”<sup>5</sup> Though this lateral definition has fallen out of common use, much of African and black diasporic theory, art, and literature is informed by a complex politics of forced and volitional transformation through European colonialism, not just in language, but in land, and the construction of self.

In contemporary Congolese artist Sammy Baloji’s *Mémoire*,<sup>6</sup> black bodies haunt the frame, wavering between gray and gossamer, charcoal and opaque. In this multimedia photography series,

---

<sup>3</sup>“art, n.1.” OED Online. Oxford University Press, June 2019. Web. 23 July 2019

<sup>4</sup>Lund, Karsten. “The Chicago School of Media Theory Theorizing Media since 2003.” The Chicago School of Media Theory RSS, 2007, [lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/translation/](http://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/translation/).

<sup>5</sup>“art, n.1.” OED Online. Oxford University Press, June 2019. Web. 23 July 2019

<sup>6</sup>*Mémoire* can be translated in English to mean the literary genre of memoir writing. It can also mean memory, remembrance or keeping something in mind.

Baloji juxtaposes archival images from 1906 of European officials and Congolese laborers who worked for the Belgian mining company, Mining Union of the Upper Katanga (now Gécamines), with original photographs taken 100 years later. Though the images overlay a century, they evoke iterations of industrial yet barren landscapes, ashen and vexed laborers, and uneven power relations. Through photography Baloji affords a kind of time travel and critical reflection on how European colonial practices of exploitation continue inhuman conditions in the mines. Baloji allows us to perceive how colonial greed translates into the Congolese landscape. However, there are multiple registers of translation in motion. While the images transpose time, the photographs themselves are acts of translation through the medium (digital photographs overlay archival images on satin matte paper). As such, it is worth considering the multiple layers of translation at play within Africa and its diasporas that transcend the verbal.

It is in this spirit *Vibrate!* contemplates the implications of Africa and its diasporas in translation, moving through temporalities and mediums, from the literary to mixed media, and pivots on a notion of translation generated by particular modes of questioning identity, and various colonial histories that engender underlying assumptions about blackness.

This issue is robust with contradictions exhibiting linguistic, geographical, and conceptual tensions, contending with what it means to speak from various kinds of African and African diasporic identities. While some contributors highlight the frustrations of expressing Africanity through colonial languages, others consider colonial languages possible vernaculars with which to challenge colonial thought, using both colonial and local African languages with intention. Still, some insist on promoting the enriching qualities of local African languages like Yoruba. And some contributors turn to various forms of code and media as a method to consider the poetics of translating blackness and Africanity.

An ethical reading and appreciation of literature written by African writers, or art works put together by African artists, in a Western space demands genuine intellectual and practical efforts to discard the colonial relics that obstinately survive into the current moment,



in pursuit of a better future of prosperity that does not have to rest upon exploitation, subordination and elimination of other people. It is therefore convenient to quote from two verses<sup>7</sup> written by the renowned Mozambican woman writer Paulina Chiziane's *The Song of the Slaves*,<sup>8</sup> composed to honor the slaves and other "offspring of Africa" who suffered the consequences of imperialism, and to facilitate remembrance of the essence of African literature and culture:

**Africanidade**<sup>9</sup>

A africanidade não está na superficialidade garrida das capulanas

Africanidade é a busca da tua existência desde o princípio do mundo

É libertar a mente para não te colonizares a ti mesmo

É colocar o saber das academias ao serviço da liberdade

**Africanity**

Africanity is not in the smug superficiality of capulanas

Africanity is the search of your existence from the beginning of the world

It is to liberate the mind so that you do not colonize yourself

It is to put the knowledge of the academies at the service of liberty

Frieda Ekotto, Imani Cooper Mkandawire and Xiaoxi Zhang

---

<sup>7</sup>In the epigraph, Paulina Chiziane did not call this work poetry. Instead she wrote,

Com estes versos escravos, remontamos à raiz de todos os conflitos.

São versos livres, tristes, alegres, musicados, para ritmar a dança da história.

[With these slave verses, we reassemble the root of all the conflicts.

[These verses are free, sad, happy, musical, to give rhythm to the dance of the history.]

<sup>8</sup>O Canto dos Escravos, Maputo: Matiko e Arte, Lda, 2017.

<sup>9</sup>The part quoted in this introduction is only one stanza of the entire poetic song. It is translated by Xiaoxi Zhang.



*Untitled 2016* | Njabulo Dzonzi



**Kagayi Ngobi**

*Oluzungu lumbe, English  
Language Is Death! | No  
Speaking Vernacular*

*Translated by the author*



## OLUZUNGU LUMBE<sup>1</sup> (Lusoga)

Oluzungu lumbe!

Lwise abaana be nsi eno-

Oluzungu lumbe!

Lutusibye amajegere-

Oluzungu lulimi lukawa inho-

Luliku na magha-

Luwanda busagwa-

Oluzungu lumbe!

Oluzungu lumbe!

Lututwaire abaana baife-

Lututwaire amagezi gaife-

Lutukwese ebyobugaiga-

Nga ebyobuwangwa byaife-

Oluzungu lumbe!

Oluzungu lumbe!

Batukuba gya nte-

Okwega olulimi olwo-

Olulimi olutali lwaiffe-

Batukoba edhaiffe-

Mbu dhiri 'local'

Obuntubulamu buweire wo-

Lufuire abosomi kizibu eri ensi yaife-

Oluzungu lumbe!

Oluzungu lumbe!

---

<sup>1</sup>This poem was written in Lusoga and translated into English.

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE IS DEATH!

English language is death!

It has killed the children of this world—

English language is death!

It has chained us—

English language is a bitter tongue!

It has thorns all over it—

It spits poison—

English language is death!

English language is death!

It has taken our children away—

It has taken away our knowledge—

It has hidden our treasures—

Like our cultures—

English language is death!

English language is death!

They beat us like cows—

To learn this language—

To learn not of our people—

They tell us of our own—

That they are 'local'—

Our humanness is used up—

It has turned the learners into a problem to our country—

English language is death!

English language!

**NO SPEAKING VERNACULAR!<sup>2</sup> (WOLOOLO)**

FOR YOU  
GRACE DAMBYA

AND THE REST OF US  
PUNISHED AT SCHOOL  
FOR SPEAKING

OUR MOTHER TONGUES.

---

<sup>2</sup>This poem was written in English and is meant to appear only in English.



1

Aha! It's you Dambya

Today I have caught you!  
Today you are not escaping me!  
Dambya, I have heard you  
Today I have heard you  
With my own ears  
You have said GWE

Get out get out  
Get out of the dorm  
Come outside here  
You let him pass  
Come, come, come  
Every day, every single day,  
They report to me  
That you use vernacular  
And every time I ask you  
You deny, you say they lie,  
And you can deny, Dambya—  
You are so good at denying  
But today I have caught you  
With my own ears!

I have heard you  
Speaking vernacular  
Today no denying!  
Today no?

But Dambya, why? Why  
Do you always speak vernacular  
And you deny?  
Dambya why are you so local?  
What do you not know?  
The school rules and regulations?

Who allowed you  
To speak your mother tongue?

Dambya, if you cannot talk English  
How will you learn?  
If you cannot talk English  
How will you pass?  
If you cannot talk English  
How will you communicate?  
If you cannot talk English  
Where will you get a job  
In the future?

The reason your parents  
Brought you to this school  
Is so that we transplant  
The village out of you  
And make you civilized

You have to speak English  
All the time, all the?

Excuse me! Yes, you!  
Run to the staff room  
You know where I sit?  
Check under my desk there  
You will see my stick  
You know it, not so?  
Bring it to me  
Hurry I don't have time

Dambya, the reason  
I am going to give you  
15 strokes of that cane  
Is not because I am a bad person  
No, it is because I want to remove  
That village out of you

That is why your parents  
Brought you to this school

Lie down, ah, ah  
Sorry for what?  
Dambya if I do not cane you  
You will not understand  
Dambya no bargaining  
No, no  
Sorry for what?  
Ah! Ah!

Dambya lie down  
Sorry for what?  
Dambya no, no  
No negotiating

Today I caught you  
With my own?

Lie down.

Dambya, you know  
The school rules, not so?  
No speaking vernacular  
Full stop.

Aha! This is the stick  
I was talking about  
As flexible as I like it!  
Dambya you know  
What it is up next, not so?  
'Sugar Special Time'

Hehehe! Go down  
You touch there  
I don't count.



2

Good morning school

The teacher on duty  
Has already talked about it  
The Speech Prefect  
Has also talked about it  
Last week I also touched on it  
But once again, I shall emphasize it:  
The issue of vernacular  
Being used in this school  
Should be put to bed  
Once and for all, full stop.

Vernacular speaking  
In this school  
Should stop.

It is a problem now  
Becoming a disease!

Local languages  
Belong in your village homes  
Not among the civilized here

In this school we only allow you  
To speak foreign languages  
Local languages are forbidden  
Local languages are?  
The school rules are clear!  
All of you must know  
This is not a local school.

Now yesterday I caught this boy,  
Where is he? Where is Dambya?

Come now in front here  
For the whole school to see  
The village in you; where is he?  
Aha! This one. You boy  
You are very stubborn, kneel down!

School, you all know this boy,  
Look at him

This boy is very stubborn  
Every day they report to me this Dambya  
That he uses vernacular  
But when he is caught, ho!  
He becomes a problem;  
He threatens prefects  
That him he cannot be touched  
Because him he is big

But yesterday was the day  
I was doing inspection  
I saw Dambya seated there in his dorm  
One slipper blue, another one red  
Am I lying?  
I heard him tell his friend GWE

I heard him with my own ears

So this week — the sisal sack  
And bone necklace  
Belong to Dambya of S.5  
‘The Early Man of the Week’  
You are to wear them today  
From morning up to end of class  
To serve the example to others  
Like you out there who think  
This school is for the uncivilized and local  
We are a first class school

And we speak English  
We speak?

Now you stand up —  
Get that thing and wear it now  
Also put on that necklace  
Today you are going  
To stand outside my office  
Until school ends  
To demonstrate to the other Dambyas  
Out there who may be tempted  
To think we are not serious  
On this language issue

We are very serious

Today you will not eat break or lunch  
You will only wait for evening porridge  
And you will be the last to be served

School I hope this serves  
As a warning to all of you

As the administration  
We are committed  
To being a first class school  
That is good in English  
That is good in?

From today onwards,  
No Speaking Vernacular in this School.  
Repeat after me:  
No Speaking Vernacular in this School  
(No Speaking Vernacular in this School)  
Tell your neighbor  
No speaking vernacular in our School  
(No speaking vernacular in our School)

Alright, have a great week.



3

Good morning teachers

Thank you teacher-on-duty  
For those remarks  
I am glad dorm inspection  
Was done in no time

I also want to thank  
All those teachers who marked  
And handed in all their results  
That is the spirit  
We must be showing  
Because this year our theme  
Is Team No Sleep

I do not expect  
Any teacher to sleep  
Until this school beams  
As the modem of  
Modernity on this village

Dear teachers, we must not sleep  
Our ears must not sleep—  
To bring modernity  
To this school permanently  
We must fight this growing disease  
Of vernacular speaking conclusively  
And we must fight it together  
We must fight it?

But, but, teachers  
I am not at ease  
It has come to my attention

Some of you do not cooperate  
At giving the sisal sack  
And bone necklace  
To vernacular speakers in your class;  
It is a shame some of you also  
Communicate in vernacular  
With students imagine!

Dear teachers  
Unless you want to know  
Why a dog has no horns,  
Why are some of you  
Stupid to that level?

How can a teacher and a student  
Have the same brain?

This language issue  
Is going to get some people  
In this room fired if they think  
This is a joking subject

For example this boy Dambya  
Who I caught myself (MYSELF!)  
I caught him saying GWE

But to get him I had to get out  
All my tactics; I tiptoed like this  
Like this, like this,  
Up to behind his dormitory  
I was there for thirty minutes  
Waiting to catch him  
But finally I did. I did!

How come none of you  
Managed to capture him before?  
I suspect some of you teachers



Have been covering him  
Because he is a common culprit

Now I will use him  
For the whole school to know  
How a head filled with local languages  
(Like one rotten tomato)  
Should never contaminate  
The heads of our students

I don't want that.  
I don't want local languages  
To infest my school like Nairobi flies

I am going to call  
Dambya's parents  
To come and we end  
This issue: either he leaves  
His local languages home  
Or he leaves this school  
Once and for all full stop.

As I conclude teachers  
Our target this year  
Is to score very highly  
In the national exams  
And what does that mean?

No spreading vernacular because  
Exams are set in English

That is my message  
For this particular week  
Those of you sleeping, wake up  
Please teachers remember  
To call Dambya to stand  
In your class as an example

Of what this school should not be  
Whenever possible.

Have a great week.



4

Good morning class

Ready for literature?

Do I have to repeat  
What the headmaster repeated  
After what I repeated here last week?

You heard the headmaster again—  
On assembly  
No more vernacular speaking  
So from today onwards  
If I hear any vernacular

You will face the music  
Of that boy Dambya

So make my work easy  
By speaking only English  
And in this literature class it even  
Makes my work easily easier

The good thing is  
English is an international language  
It can make you travel  
But local languages  
They take you where?  
To your villages  
Is that where you want to end up?

You see the books we teach  
In what language are they?  
In what language is the national anthem?  
In what language is the national motto?  
In what language is the national constitution?

So make my work easy  
By speaking only English  
And in this literature class it even  
Makes my work easily easier

Where did we stop last time?  
Where did we stop?  
Where did we stop last time?  
All of you open your books  
And put your novels on top of your desks  
You, you do not have the novel?  
You, you left it in dorm?  
Yours, a friend borrowed it?  
All of you go and lie down there

Now you ki-girl, you also  
Do not have the novel?  
Do not waste my time  
Just go in front there  
And lie flat, your forehead  
On the floor, and stay there

What kind students are you  
Who come to my literature class  
Without the novel?  
Can you go to the garden  
Without your hoe?

Class, I say this all the time  
If you want to pass this subject  
What do you do?

*Carry your book to  
Copy your notes to  
Sharpen your tongue to  
Pronounce your pronouns and  
Sing your syntax as  
The heart palpitates to  
The pace of the plot thru  
The pentameter and  
Just like that,  
You are civilized!*

You, who likes Ateso, look at you  
Can you make such rhyme  
Without reading book?  
Can you even make that  
In your mother tongue?

Is there even literature  
In your mother tongue?

Literature is literature  
Only in English

You people without books  
What do we do for you?  
I don't want empty tins in my class

Without books  
You are empty tins

Go to the D.O.S.  
Tell him to choose for you  
another subject  
I don't want you in mine  
I am paid to teach students  
Not empty tins

Now this ki-girl crying  
Without books  
How can you study literature?  
Literature is in books  
And if you don't have books  
You don't belong to this class!

Out!  
✦ ✦ ✦

5  
Daudi

Kumbe you are Dambya's uncle?

You said his parents live far?  
And even now  
They are not in the country?

That is okay  
Come to my office

We wanted to *only* talk to his father  
Because this issue at hand  
Is very serious

But, Daudi, since I know you  
For old times' sake  
I shall speak to you

This Dambya you see was caught  
Speaking vernacular  
By no one else except myself

I caught him this time  
With my own ears

It is a very serious issue  
It means Dambya shall not  
Pass his exams  
It will be bad for the school  
And we do not want that here

Daudi, we have already  
Decided Dambya deserves  
An exemplary punishment  
A suspension of three weeks  
To serve as a reminder  
To him and the others  
Who speak vernacular

It is irregular

Daudi, this son of yours  
Is very stubborn  
He even teases my prefects  
But this time

I caught him with my own ears  
Daudi this issue is very serious

He said GWE  
In the dormitory  
And I was there

Take him home  
And let him he speak  
All the local languages he wants  
When he returns I want to see him  
Immunized from vernacular  
Ready to speak only English

No, Daudi, no, please do not plead  
Do not kneel,

God, this is disgusting  
Daudi the decision is final  
Daudi it cannot be changed

He threatens my prefects!

Take Dambya with you  
Dambya you must learn  
To respect our regulations  
I want my school  
To be a first class school

Now, if you excuse me  
Daudi take your son with you  
And bring him back after three weeks

I hope he learns  
His lesson this time

English is the language  
Of the civilized.

✦ ✦ ✦

6

Excuse me, give me ko your pen

*Eh eh you, that is vernacular*

Sha! We are not in class  
Those things stop at the school ends

*Education is also practiced after school*

Sha! School is school  
Dorm is dorm  
Market is market  
And a garden is a garden

Take your lugezigezi  
Back to your headmaster!

*Eh eh, you; Mr. Full Stop says  
He has ears all over the place  
What if he hears you talking now?*

Akole ki? You fear fear a lot you also

*Without English  
You will fail your exams*

Look here  
Even teachers are teachers  
Because they failed the exams  
Of lifestyle and lifetime

*Teachers are failures?*

Eeeh! Teachers are failures  
Who take their failures  
Out on us by being mean  
Because they see us  
As the dreams they will never be

*Me I fear being beaten like Dambya*

Imagine being there  
And all you think of is  
How to use pain  
Umbu to bring success  
Kyoka carrying around a cane  
As if military police!

*But without English*



*There is no job for you*

Mpa ku pen naawe  
I want to beat this ffene  
But I cannot reach it.

*You, you don't fear  
Being beaten like Dambya?*

Dambya kyali wange  
Oyo Mr. Full Stop talina magezi  
Education is not about what you teach  
But what I observe  
And I observe this ffene is ripe  
Bring the pen

*We will keep some for Dambya?*

Of course man we have to!  
Mwana boyi ali mu kawunyemu  
This school is fake  
It needs to give me a break

*It has also reached my neck*

Get your neck out of the way  
I am bringing down the ffene

*I hear they are calling Dambya's zei's  
Kale for just one word  
GWE*

Kwata pen yo  
You have homework to do  
Not so?  
Nanti you fear

Being beaten like Dambya  
Not so?  
Get your pen  
With the masanda  
Let it stick to your hands  
All the time  
To make Mr. Full Stop happy.

*I hate that man  
Dambya did nothing wrong*

Dambya did nothing. Full Stop.

✦ ✦ ✦

7

Early man! Early man!

DAMBYA WELCOME BACK!

Early man! Early man!

Early man Dambya!

Dambya welcome back!

Story ki Dambya? Mwana what's up?

Man you missed the kadanke

And the interact func

Man you missed the Rugger game

Man how was home?

Hi, Dambya

Hiiii Dambya

This Dambya is back

You Dambya, come here  
So you are back?

Early man Dambya!

Today is Friday  
I hope you have all  
All your class notes by Monday  
If you don't you will know  
Why a dog has no horns

Dambya, you stubborn boy!  
Come here. Carry these books  
To the staffroom

Hahahaha! So you are back Dambya?

**DAMBYADAMBYADAMBYA**

Lie down I cane you

How was home?

Did you speak enough vernacular

In your Lusoga?

I hope you learnt your lesson

You looked good in the sack

And that necklace too!

I wish we catch you another time!  
Alright you go to class  
The bell for the next lesson already went

Dambya! DAMBYA! DAMBYA!

Chief Vernacular speaker!  
Zinjathropus poster!

Enter class Dambya, but keep  
Your local languages outside!  
Do not spread them in here DO YOU HEAR?

(Excuse, is that the one  
Mr. Full Stop called Stupid Boy?)  
-He is the one-

*That one he will fail exams  
He will be a failure in life  
That one he will fail exams  
He hates English*

What's up Dambya?

The village boy!

Hahahaha! The village boy!  
Hahahahaha!

Dambya what's wrong?  
Come on man stop being angry  
We are only joking

Man, stop catching feelings  
Man me I'm your buddy  
Dambya, this is a small issue

Just be cool  
Ignore everyone  
I know this school is fake man

But you will make it through.



**Moses Kilolo**

*Kimwana Kithini Nikyalika  
Kivinduni, An Immortal  
Precariat Goes into the Night*

*Translated by the author*



## Kimwana Kithini Nikyalika Kivinduni<sup>1</sup>

Elliot esima tiivii na ayulwa ni stalehee syakwe mituki, ayiungama kuma sovasetini nikana asome SMS simuni. Awĩnja niwamuand-ikia nikana mathi makatembee. Īndĩ eiwa woo mwingi nunduwa mechaniki uthukukumaa na kelele mwingi vakuvi na vala wikalaa Roysambu, vau utee wa lelu munene wa Thika. Nundu ndatony'a kumwika undu, eũma makaniki usu ngooni, aũmanitye maeyo na esilitwe mesilwa maingi. Simu yake ya Samsung Galaxy yĩwa yi ngĩ-to muno yila wesilwa yiulu wa Mũlatwa na wasya wake wi mwololo muno. Namo moko make na syaa mausie yuũtia yila yiutuma kioo kya simu kiyithiwa kikwatene. Lakini nundu ena wendi munene, emantha namba ila sivwaa ta swina wikwatyo wikavaa. Kuma yila wookie Ilovĩ niwamanyĩie kwitasya silingi ngili imwe. Amĩtaa K, ndeto ya Sheng ila umitumĩia muno ayienda kuvoya mbesa.

Eĩwa wĩa mwingi ki, ta isatani yiũmwĩta ngingo eesilwa kumukunia simu Mũlatwa. Nĩ wĩa utaawiwa ona aitembea stlĩtini sya Ilovĩ eweka utuku kati, ayenda kwiwa ta ve vandu vaseo wita musyi. Mithenya mingi ewaa emenete vyũ. Mũno mũno yila ũendaa maũfisi- ini maingi kumantha wia na andũ asũ maimwia tũ atie mathangũ make ma kumina sũkũlũ. Īndĩ masaa ma utuku vyu wiwaa amen- dete mũno, yila musyi munene wa Ilovĩ wikalaa ta ukomete. Ma- saani asũ no andu anini methiawa leluni: ala matakomaa, athukumi anoũ kĩ ma maufisi matwaite gali syoo nene sya Toyota na Mercedes maĩmantha kwendwa, twilitu twikĩite tukula tukuvi vyũ, na ĩndi syokola. Onthe maimantha kwiwa o nesa kiwiyooni mateusumbu- wa ni mũndũ. No askali tũ mamakĩiaa maikakwate ni musako. Ona ou wiovo, Elliot aitembea Ilovĩ masaa asũ ma utuku ateũkia kindu ona kimwe. Lakini yũ ayenda kumukunia Mũlatwa simu eiwa vinya wonthe uimuthela. Esindwa vyu kivinyiia kambaton kau ka girini kumukunia simu mwanake umwitaa mwanaa iya.

Elliot etina kavakũli mwou yila ukuũngama kuma kisovasetini athi kisũmbani cha ukoma. Nũndũ ndekwenda kuthamba eona tũ evake marashi ma aũme ala metawa Yardley Legacy. Kamunthyũngo kau kaseo niko kindu chai cha mbee Awĩnja wamwendeĩe. Mũthen-

---

<sup>1</sup>This story is written in Kamba, a popular spoken Bantu language in Kenya.



ya usu Awĩnja amwonie aungamite nza wa mbaa yitawaa Gipsy, aikunda kundanga vangĩ. O vau tenange mũthenyani ousu we Elliot niwatetaniye na mbosi wake ula waleea kumuandika kwawo onathithiwa niwamuthukumite mwei muonza ila meewanite. Vangĩ ũsũ ni wamutetheeasya ndakethiwe na meswilya maito muno.

Nake Awĩnja anywĩtwe ũkĩ mwingi ukatũmaa ayelũka, ayumya mũnyũngo mũthũkũ mũno. Oyĩla mũnyungo ũsu wathelile ona mayaa ona kana vai na thina ona vanini. Awĩnja amuvallukĩla Elliot ta maĩ anyanya ma kuma tene. Nake Elliot eewa kamũyo kaingĩ nundu wa kukoomewa ni nondo isu nene swa Awĩnja kithũĩni kyake, Awĩnja amwiĩlile matau ngingoni na moko make makwatĩle ĩtũo syake o sekondi nini. Na maĩvakũvĩ kusalukanya yĩla Awĩnja watan-gatangie. Elliot niwamũkwatĩe na mitũkĩ na kwoko kwake kwa aũme kwekalanga o vaũ yĩũlũ wa kitimba kwake kinoũ kiseo, na kĩkonde mũongonĩ kyai kyololo nesa. Kwa ndatĩka oĩmwe, metho moo ni-makomanĩe vau mamũlikitwe ni kyeni cha nza cha mbaa ĩsũ yeet-awaa Gipsy. Navo vau mokoni make Awĩnja niweewĩe kaundu kaseo. Metho make asũ maĩ ma mbraũnĩ makwatwa ni methoĩ. ĩndĩ Elliot niwaleile kwitikila kana methoi asu maĩ ma wendo. Metho ma Awĩn-ja ona mayaakomwa ni ũnywĩ, makanite tamamwene mbee wa mwĩĩ wake ngĩnya nthĩni ngooni.

Awĩnja ndaaeka kumusyaaĩsya utuku usu ona yĩla mekalile vau nza ya golofa isu yai utee wa mbaa. Nĩvo Awĩnja wamanthie sikala muvukoni wake kwa mũtuki mũtuki. Elliot nake ndaa ananga ndakĩ-ka, oosa kĩlĩvĩĩ amukwatisya. Awĩnja aendeĩe kũmũsuva, nake asyoka na ĩĩna nikana aũngame nesa. Nĩvo ĩndĩ Awĩnja wakũndĩe kasikala kaũ na aathamya nikana syuki yukile yo mbeene ateũyilasimithwa. Na ĩndĩ Awĩnja akũna sĩmĩĩĩ ĩkovĩ oĩnini, ayenda Elliot oke kwikala vakuvi nake. Mekalite vaũ Elliot niwasiisye oona ivisi na elĩĩtu maitembea makwatene moko, angi ala manywite muno makwatĩlĩlwe maĩka-valũke. Na vaĩ o elĩtũ elĩ kakonani vandũ maendee na kũmũmũnyana, na vakũvĩ namo kĩvĩsĩ cha yĩika yake kwaũmanaa simũni. Ni wekalile vakũvĩ na Awĩnja, ũla nake waĩlĩle manyũũ make safĩni yake, akunda munyung'o wa marashi. Nĩvo Awĩnja weewĩe muyo na asisya kungi, muvaka ĩvu ya Elliot yeekũnza. Ila wamanyie kana ndenekee niwook-ililye kituo kwake na anyungĩa makwava make.

ĩndĩ Awĩnja amusiswa na amũkulwa: “We nũe ũũ?”

Nake asūngia: “Elliot.”

“Elliot? Wimanisha Elliot ta ūla waandikaa voemu?”

“Ayiee, ta mwīni wa mbathi sya kisasa sya Amelika. Nye kondau-  
mite kuya New York, na ni vaa llovī tu mweī o nini, na īndī Njanuary  
ndisyoka kuya Amelika.”

O athekete vanini, Awīnja asya: “Winyung’ a nesa, Elliot.”

Īndi kwivaka marashi ni kindu George wa Mūlatwa woona ta  
wana, tī kīndū cha ndūme take. Mūlatwa avūthitye tabia īsū vyū,  
oundū ūtendete kukengana. Noo uvūngu nawo Elliot niwawendete  
muno. Nicho woonie kunyunga nesa kwi kuseo kūvīta kūneena ūwo  
yīla mundu wina mwendwa wake.



Ethī mbavū na ayūngama nthī ya kīwū kivyū cha kīthambio,  
avūngīte metho na vīnya aeke kwisilwa īlūlū wa Mūlatwa. We eenda  
mesilwa ala memuyo ma matūkū ala maseo na Awīnja, yīla wathu-  
kumaa vengi ya utūīnī. Mavinda asu athukumie tu mwaī itatū na  
avūtwa nūndū wīa niwathelile. Īndī maūandiki aa ma īvalūa kūya  
vengini, kampuni site swa silikali, na ūsomīnī maūndu asū ma īvalūa  
ni mamwiwithisye woo muno.

Kīwū kīmwītikīa na kumūnya savūnī mituki. Ona ndanakīta  
mūongo kana maaū atanambakuma kithambīonī. Nasyo ngūa eis-  
yikia mītūkī, ekiite itīshati yiasa yiendanye na njiins swake sya langi  
wa matu. Īndī kīndū kila kimwaīlite vyu ni itatū. Niwaendia ndukani  
nene swa Mr. Price na Avilas aimantha itatū nzaū sya matuku aya.  
Lakini nawo kila wakatano nuamukaa tene vyū athi syoko ya Kikom-  
ba matūka kuū matanavunguwa. Kuthoowa mutumba museo wa  
kisasa tī vinya wavika tene. Elliot muno muno niwisi kumantha na  
e vaati nzeo. Lakini niwiwaa ve vīnya aīmūelesya Awīnja nduka ila  
kuya Westlands wathooīe kiatu kyu. Ūmunthi ekiite kīatū cha nduka  
ya Atalīano yitawa Salvatore Ferragamo. Etata muno kutumia gluū  
kikwatanyithwa maandiko ma kīatū nundu nimekumakumanga.  
Naīndī yinthangu yītilika aīendee na kuyilasimithya. We tī mundu  
wa kwika maundu nesa, na eona vala ithangu yū yiandikitwe isyit-  
wa ya brandi īsū yiumwanangia saa sywake. Ayivaka marashi aūn-  
gamite mbee wa kīoo, na munyung’ o ūsū museo nī ta ngua nyololo  
imwilingite.

Aūmaalūka nyumba eīsilā kasilani kala kakwatanitwe Roysambu ya tene na ila īnaakiwe oyu. Eona tū ve mundu wīšī kila ngaliko ya kasilani kau ka TRM. Lakini vaī umwe ukūungama kumukethya nūndū ena halaka. Nyumba īsū nene ya kuthooa syīndu yīo ndakīka ītano kuma kwake, na kila ītambya yimuetete vakūvī na George Mūlatwa.

Elikīila TRM kwīsilā mūoma wa ītīna. Andū aīngi vyū nimekalite vau va kuthooa leū, maīneena na wasya munīni. Vamīlīa na endani onthe maendee kumanthana na kwendana maiya leū sya muthemba wonthe. Mbaa nene yitawaa Persia ndinandū yū nūndū ni muthenya, lakini wīyoo yīthīawa na andu aīngī maiya laha. Golofanī ya keelī ya nyumba īno yī na matuka maīngī, lakini ndekwendeesya yū ni ndūka ya kuta syīndū sya mathaū kana īla ya kuta syīndū sya kompūta ya Apple. Veo ivinda wendete ndūka īsū muno. Eenda tū kumwona Mulatya uvisini wake, ula ni kakivanda kanīnī kethiawa vau katikati wa matuka. Mulatya emwona na aithingithya mūtwe wake kumyonya nīwamwona. Atanamba kumuneenya ekeuka kuisya muthooī wake ūla ūkwenda kaseti ya kivindi cha Game of Thrones. Uthyu wa Mulatya uūsia kyeni yila ūkusmīli lakini mataū make manōū mayyaa ta mavakītwe maūta maīngi kī. Eītu eli maūngamite o vaū maīsyisya mavuku ma sinema nikana mathooe, na nomeūvinduka īmwe kwa īmwe mamutheche Elliot.

Īndī mwīsyo Mulatya nukukeuka amuisye Elliot, na ayiendee kuneena ta eusomaa musoa.

“Nye niniamue kumantha mbesa nikana nongelelee nduka īno yakwa. Ikonomi ya Kenya nīyithi naku. Nye nīka undu nitonya, na nienda yu we undīve kila niunengete nundu nikuma tene naukoveithya.”

“Wienda kumbanya mbesa siana?”

“Ngīlī maana atatu. Ve nduka nzeo muno vaa maisye yiithiwa yi nthei mwei uū ukite na nienda kumyosa nikana none biashara īi yakwa itonya kuthi va.”

O yila simu yake yaīa Elliot nukulikana na kyeva kingi kana niwamutavitye Mulatya yiulu wa wia wa mbesa mbingi unakwatite vau mwei uyambiia. Amwie wia ūsū akwatie kumana na anyanya ma īthe wake ma biashara.

Simu niyakunwa ingi, na amisisya Elliot eona ani Awīnja

ũkũnite. Alea kumyosa simu ĩsũ namo mamessenji melika kulika. Awĩnja emwia kana kethiwa ndeuka we eona nukuthi na anyanyawa make kundu kungi makasherehekee kusyawa kwa umwe woo.

“We, Mulatya, nĩenda unenge o ngĩlĩ ĩtano o mituki mituku nin-guutungia mbosi wakwa ambiva matuku miongo ĩlĩ na nthyanthya. Ona ni na mbesa ingi niteele o vandu matuku o asũ. Ninguũsoti mani.”

“Yaani mwanoo wienda ngunenge ngĩlĩ ĩtano oyũ oyũ?”

Yu Mulatya kouteulea na vinya na kuneena na wasya mwingi nginya eitũ asũ matindie masyitwe ĩatũ sya Elliot mamusisya ũthyũ.

“Yaani mwanoo ona inya wakwa ndakwata silingi imwe kuma kwakwa yũ. Nganenga mundu kindu omunthenya ula biashara ĩ ngwetwe yooka sawa sawa. Nĩkwatwa nuelewa yu kimwana, na no wisi kana wĩ na ngili sykwa ikumi na itano.”

Elliot ena woo mwingi kwiwa undu Mulatya ukwisilwa, nginya akaumana:

“Ngĩti!”

Ena woo usu wonthe Elliot ayumaaluka matukani asũ ateunjali Mulatya na andu onthe ala wakomana namo measya ata.

Ĩla woosa simu amukunie Peter, nivo ukwona kana o na nde na klenditi. Lakini Safaricom nayo ndimunengaa ‘please call me’ na ko unatumia syonthe. Kooũ ayasya asanda kwa matu na nthi kwa kumunenga syama on nini nini. We na Peter nimesene vyũ kibiashala, na niwisi kana ndetindwa thinani ũũ wa mukwata yu.

Peter aimwosa na kumutwaa kula Awĩnja wikalaa. ĩndĩ we Elliot ailea kuthi kumwosa nyumba, aimukunia simu oke nthi.

Nake Awĩnja aĩmwia:

“Nenge o ndakika ĩmwe kindu chakwa. Nitukite.”

Elliot na Peter meetelile vakuvi na ndakika miongo ina na itano, na nivo Elliot watumĩe ivinda yũ kutata kumwia Peter anthee-anje mbesa ila wendaa kuivya. ĩndĩ ndeto ĩsũ niswamwiwithisye woo mwingi muno Peter, nũndu mamwĩte eteele na Elliot nowendaa aninivyange mbesa. ĩndĩ mwisio Peter niweetikilile kuivwa ngĩlĩ ita-tu kethiwa nimaekanie nake athi mawiani angi na aimosa mamina kunywa uki woo. Ona ve ũũ Peter niwaisye nilasima aivye nusu, na nusu ila ingi ayiivya amenukywa.

Awĩnja aumaluka ookie na Caro, mwĩtu munyanyae Elliot

wamwonete o imwe vaũ mbeange. Namo kotemeekiite tusulwali twoonanitwe matako moo vyu. Nichokitumi imwana syaungamite nza wa nduka ya Samu maekie kuneena na mamasũviliila tu. Onasyo iveti ila syaumite kuthooa mboka nosyavindukie kwona eitũ asũ. Īatũ ila ndaasa Awĩnja weekite syauitwe ni asyai make mekalaa muiongo kuya Paris, Kivalanza. Namo ni asyai umonaa o imwe kwa mwaka. Ona ve uũ niwendete aĩtu ĩsu, lakini nisyā mulasimithisyā kutembea o mbola. Īndĩ mwiso avika ngalini evũngũa muomo kwa mituki Elliot atanamba kivikia kwika oũ.

Eĩtu asũ eli ona mayaaea ngewa ya maana na Elliot. Īndĩ kati woo nimaneenie muno uilu wa tivi na ivindi ila meloelaa. Oimwe kwa imwe Awĩnja nowe wamukulalya Elliot kana niweetikila undu waasasya. Lakini Elliot ndendete ngewa ĩsu maneena yulu wa eĩtu mendate maundu ma ĩndanetĩ na maisha ma yiulu muno. We asisyā o vanini vau ivila sya itina eitu mekalite, na niwoonie kana Caro niwamusimaa metho, ayukilya maau make o vanini ta ukumwia Elliot ni asisyē uthei wake. Ndakika o ikumi siithela mai mavikie Mountain Mall. Eĩtu mauma ngalini we Elliot atiwa vaũ aineena na Peter. Īĩna wa ndikika o ĩli niwamaatĩie na malika liftini nikana mathi kilavu cheetawa Comfort golofani ya katatu. Makwatie ivila vakuvi na kiwanza kya kusunga vai vakuvi na mbaa.

Weita amina kumakulya mendaa kunywa chau Elliot niwamaatĩia na kumutyetya muno, na eĩtũ nimeuseng'a nichau kiendee vau. Ona yila wasyoka vala maĩ simu yake yitindia kuia. Ayienda maikone oũ, Elliot emitiliila vau muvukoni, lakini nake Awĩnja ula oona nichau kieendee aimyosa kwa mituki muno.

“Itila yii! Niki uteosa simu ya ndelewa wa taksii?”

Ve kuseng'a kwigi mbee wa woo wasyani wake Awĩnja. Nivo Elliot ukumea mamwetele o vanini athi kuneenya Peter vala umutiie. Yuyu ona Peter niwumie ngalini aungama nza, ekiite ivulana ya grini yitutuma ayikala ta imwana inene ya sukulu.

Ena woo mwingi Peter aimwia:

“Nienda mbesa syakwa oyuyu na ndukone ta uũndinya vaa. Nina wia wa kwika.”

“Tuliza mboli naku Peter. Tuliza.”

Onakau yayai mundu wi vakuvi kumewa, Elliot emukwata Peter kwoko na kumutwaa ovau kando maneene. Metetanwa muno, Elliot

aneenete Kikamba kiito kiutuma Peter ayisilya notamaumite o vandu vamwe kuya utuini.

Īndī Peter ayisa kwasya: “Nye ninguelewa kimwana, lakini, konisa kuungama vaa wiyoo wonthe nikwetele nandunandiva.”

“Nisawa ĩndī tutwae kuya Westlands ngakuivie vo. ATM ya vaa ndiuthukama.”

Awĩnja ndeenda kumwa kiwanzani cha usunga. Elliot amukwata kwoko ekukukuna amueke. Esunga na ĩmundu ĩnoũ yina kitambi kinene, na kwoko kwake Awĩnja kukwatiie ngusu ya itina ya mundu usu, vala vena woleti noũ vyũ. Awĩnja kukuna kwoko kwa Elliot aeke kumukwata, o yila ĩmundu yũ yiumuthengeea Awĩnja matuni nikana yimusuviliile kaundu. Nivo mwisio Elliot amukusya na vinya mathi nza. Awĩnja aisemba kwosa ũkĩ wake na kuvuvuutya. Nivo ĩndī aĩthingithya mutwe wake ta mundu ukwatwite ni majini. Elliot aĩmwia Caro amutwae Awĩnja ngalini, nundu vau itina ve weita umuatiie. Vala mavika nza memweteela vakuvi ndakika miongo ili.

Nivo ĩndī Awinja ukumukwata kwoko na vinya na kumukulwa:

“Nichau kieendee ĩndī? Ndavye oyu kana nikume?”

Indi Elliot aimusunguia:

“Tuendete kuya Westlands nikwo kwi maundu maseo mbee wa kuu.”

Mavika Westlands emea eĩtũ asu mamwetele kilavuni cha Aqua. We Caro ethi imwe kwa imwe kusunga, atingithitye kitimba ta elitu ala ma vindio sya musiki tiiviini maisunga wathi wa Njaman njuisi. Nake Awĩnja ayikala kwa aeini ma ndaia na kwitwa isovi. Elliot e nza aineene na Peter ula yu wambiie kukita na askari ma muomoni ayenda kulika.

“We, we, aume, ekanai nake uũ ni ndelewa wakwa wa taksii, ninguneena nake.”

Masonga utee Elliot ayambiia kuneena na ka aksendi ka Amerika, o undu MuAmerika mwiu utonya kuneena. Lakini Peter nake ndeenda kwiwa utumanu ũsu, ndeto syake sya Kikamba siteuma nesa nundu wa woo. Elliot aimwosa kumutwaa vau utee, lakini nake Peter koukwenda kwiwa kĩndu ona vanini.

“Ithukiisyi Peter, naku ithukiisye Peter niki? Ninguunenga simu yakwa alafu uindũngia uni nakũiva, sawa? Sawa Peter?”

“Ati simu? Simu yaki nye ko ngwenda simu yaku. Nienda undive

mbesa swakwa ndia ĩno. Koono ta nisa kulwa kana chumwa kithelu ndwaandiva ona ndululu imwe.”

“Kino. Peter. Kino.”

“Ndukaumane we ndia ĩ. Ndukatate kuũmania vaa.”

“Īndĩ naku Peter ni chau yũ nanotwisene? Simu ii ngũunenga ni ya ngili miongo ina na kenda, yaani wiisilwa . . .”

“Miete.”

Peter aĩmyosa simu ĩsu na mituki na kuthi taksiini yake. Elliot einguma ovu amusyaiisye. Īndĩ avinduka eona Awĩnja auingaminte itina wake, aumanitwe maeyo na woo mwingi kĩ. Nake Caro eo vu itina wa Awĩnja, aumukomba.

Awĩnja nake aimukulwa Elliot:

“Ni chau kieendee?”

“Vai kindu, nisawa vyu.” Elliot aimusungia. “Kwani ko mwaeka kunywa?”

“Weita ni watuete mbilu yitu, asya ndeenda kwiwa kana nue ukuiva. Yaani mwanoo ukaa mbaa na uĩnywa na klenditi na nduivaa?”

“Klenditi kiva we?”

“Ndia ino nuu ula withiawa ena mandeni kilavuni?”

“Tuliza mboli Awĩnja, nilasima weita usu ndesi kila ukuweta.”

“Sawa. Aya yu ndavie, niki Peter wathi, na tena athi na simu yaku?”

“Īthukiisye ngutavye kendu wakwa, sawa, ĩthukiisye ngutavye ũwo. Nyie ndinakwata mbesa umunthi ila ngwona ta ngukwata.”

Awĩnja ayambiia kuthi, ateenda kwiwa oũ. Onakau alevi aingi nimambiisya kumasyaiisya, Elliot we ndakwete oũ woo. Ayosa kwoko kwa Awĩnja nikana amwisuve.

Awĩnja aimwia:

“Nienda kwinka nye, mbitie taksii.”

“Nionaa twambe kwosa matatu kuma vaa nginya taoni alafu kuma vau tuyosa taksii nginya kwaku? Īi, wiona ata kendu wakwa?”

“Nye, yu? Yaani ko wimutumanu ata? Wiona tanikiie ngua ta ii nikana nilike matatuni?”

Elliot esisya kuu na kuya, on imwe aimwia Caro amutetheesye. Lakini nake Caro ndeenda ou wake. Ona kula kumusimia metho nikuthelile. Eĩtu asu me eli mayienda kuneena nake ona vanini.

Nundu wa aivu Elliot ayiungamya taksii yambee kumyona, na onthe mailika mituki. Mavika leluni munene wa Thika ngali isu iyosa spidi nene muno. Nivo ĩndĩ Elliot aisonga vakuvi na Awĩnja.

“Naku mwendwa wakwa mbelewe tu. Niendaa wone kana ninikwendete.”

“Yaani wiendaa kwithiwa wi ngũmbaũ, ee?”

Elliot aimukomeea kithui na kwambiia kũĩa o mbola. Awĩnja nake ayiwa tei, amukwata mutwe na kumunweenwa na kawasya kaseo. Nake ndelewa wa taksii ndananeena ona ndeto imwe. Kethiwa ena wia wa kulea kuivwa ni alevi asu ndiowanana ona vanini. Ona yila mavika Roysambu ndeuweta kindu, nayu Elliot ayambiia kwiwa wĩa mwingi nundu ndesi ndelewa ũsu atonya kwika ata. Ona no kava ala maneenaa na mawasya manene mayenda kuivwa. Ila Elliot woona ndelewa usu ayosa kindu ungu wa kivila chake ngoo yake ikunite kukuna. Veo ngewa weewie yiulu wa ndelewa sya taksii syithiawa na pastola siitumiaa kuyia andu. Yu vaa ko mayaina kindu oteo thayu syoo.

Ĩndĩ ndelewa usu aimea:

“Osai namba yakwa na muindiva uni.”

Nivo vau onthe meewa matetheka muno. Ona utuku usu wekala ta weeuva. Yũ Elliot akwata kĩnyunyũ kya Awĩnja mwĩitu usu ona ndaamuvata. Maitiana na ndelewa usu mewite o muyo mwingi. Caro nake aimea makome nesa na kuthi vala wikalaa. Nivo ĩndĩ Elliot na Awĩnja maithi nyũmba makwatene moko.

“Kiwiyoo kii kumbe no kikwisaa usauva?” Elliot amwia Awĩnja. “Tui tuisane o nesa nikana tulwe ni maundu asu mathuku.”

Mavika nyumba Awĩnja elika kithambioni mituku. Auma kuthamba emwithia Elliot eyovete taweli ila yake ingi. Nivo ĩndĩ ukuthi akamukuna kakisi matauni na aimwia:

“Enda wambe kuthamba.”

Nake Elliot aimusungia: “Nivo vau yu kendu wakwa.”

Ethamba mituki muno, ota undu wikaa yila uteuthamba vamyee na Awĩnja. Ona ndanakua ndakika itano. Aumaaluka eithia muomo wa nyumba ya ukoma wa Awĩnja wi muinge. Navau kisovasetini ve ivula ya kwivyika. Emukunangia Awĩnja muomo, yambee ombola mbola, ĩndĩ Awĩnja alea kuvungua nukukuna na vinya muno. Awĩnja aelea vyu kuvungua. Na ĩndĩ Elliot ayikala vau kivilani mbee wa isaa



yimwe, aimwisuva Awīnja avungue lakini Awīnja ndeitika ona imwe. Lakini Elliot noukumwiwa kindu wake vau nthini. Mala nukukooa, lakini muno muno eneena nai na kumana, ngiti iī!

Mwiso nukuma nyumba saa nyanya sya utuku, itina wa kuya masilingi Awīnja eeite kavalukini vau vakuvi na tiivii. Elika matatuni itena abilia ona umwe, lakini yiendete tauni. Ngali isu kawaida ikuaa andu ikumi na ana. Lakini nao makunite musiki wina wasya mwingi ki, uutuma kelele isu iyananga kukilwa kwa kiwiyoo kiu.

Niivo īndī ukumiswa Ilovī taoni nthini kula ukwiwa thayu wake ta ukwitwa ni mandaimoni. Etembea mituki mituki athengee eitu ala maungamite laini vau stlitini wa Koinange. Evungua metho make muno, ayona kana amalasimthwa kuvunguka ou nukumwona mwii-tu wa inya ula witawa Aggy. Ni Aggy eweka umulilikanasya undu mundu wiwaa kwithiwa na usyaaniwa, ona kethiwa ndaila kumwona mwaka mingi muno. Na ngoo yake yina thina mwingi. Namo mesil-wa ni maito ki. Nivo ayiwa wasya ndu ya ivuti, na indi *swiiii* wa ki-sasi yiathite kungi. Īndī o mituki ayiwa ivuti yingi yamuatha kituoni, yikamulasimithya kutulya ndu, vakuvi avaluke nthi vyu. Ivisa yake ya mwiso kuyona ni ya Aggy, auite mbu nene na asembete kuka vala ũī. Ndesa kumanya Aggy amusembeete na muyo kumwona kana ni woo wa kila cheekika. Na o mbola mbola ayona kiwiyoo kīi kiyusua kīvindu kinene na kukilwa vyu, na ayiyiwa avalukite vandu vololo veumumelwa tene na tene.

## An Immortal Precariat Goes into the Night

Elliot mutes the television and forgets the comfort of his couch as he sits up to read Awinja's message, inviting him to take her out. He wants to scream at the arc welder next to his Roysambu flat along Thika Road, but lets out a silent and bitter curse instead, his thoughts racing. His Samsung Galaxy Trend feels heavier when he thinks of Mulatwa's soft-spoken voice. His sweaty palms and fingers make the touch screen sticky. But he scrolls on and on, looking for promising contacts. It seems he has called almost everyone in the past month, except Aggy, his sister. Always asking for a K, a letter he has become too fond of, for the ease with which he can say it when he needs money.<sup>2</sup>

When Elliot wants to call Mulatwa on the phone, fear becomes a devil suffocating his daring soul. He feels no fear when he takes his solitary, nocturnal walks in the streets of Nairobi in search of something to call home. His days are clouded with thick self-loathing, having knocked on office doors in and out of town and handed out copies of international business qualification papers. His favorite hours begin when the city seems engulfed in a strange sense of sleep—when only the insomniacs, the love-desperate, the pot-bellied office-holders driving Toyotas and Mercedes dominate the streets along with half-naked girls and homeless boys and girls. Each seek their piece of nightly space and freedom, interrupted only on occasion by Askaris on patrol. Fear never shows up at such moments. But he is paralyzed when he goes to press a button, a simple green button, to call a man he calls brother.

Elliot rises from the couch and knocks over an ashtray as he makes his way to the bedroom. He considers just changing clothes and spraying himself with a bottle of Yardley Legacy for Men. The fragrance is the first thing Awinja noticed about him.

She walked up to him on a Friday night when he stood alone outside Gipsy Bar, smoking a joint. Earlier that day, he had an altercation with a boss who would not confirm him for a permanent

---

<sup>2</sup>The use of K here is slightly borrowed from Sheng. K in Nairobi Lingo is used specifically to refer to a thousand shillings (approximately 10 USD), as one would use the word grand or G in American slang.

position after seven months, and he turned to his joint because the puffs helped create a universe where everything seemed laughable. Except there was nothing to laugh about in Awinja's two belches that night, enveloping them in rotten breath. But after a few seconds of disgust neither seemed to care. She just slumped herself on him like an old friend. And he relished the soft feeling of her rather large breasts on his chest, her chin on his neck as her hands wrapped around his neck for a few seconds, and then slipped away as she fell backwards. He reached quickly for her and with his right hand, held her tightly just above her exposed waistline, a soft curvature of flesh, smooth skin. For a single moment their eyes met under that colored glow of Gipsy Bar's security lights. In his hands she felt delicate. Her big brown eyes seemed wet, but he dismissed the thought that she'd been crying. Not dimmed by her drunkenness, they shone bright as though they could see past his physical elements and into his soul.

Awinja did not take her eyes off him that night as they sat on the next building's entrance stairs and she fumbled in her bag for a cigarette, which he quickly offered to light. For a while her facial expressions didn't change, she stared at him, even as his dark face retreated and his body regained an upright posture. Finally she took a long puff and let the smoke rise from her mouth without effort. She motioned for him to sit, slapping the stairs rather crudely with her right palm. He looked around and saw boys and girls walking hand in hand, some propping each other up because alcohol was fast immobilizing them. In a corner two girls were kissing, and a boy about his age was cursing on the phone. He sat. And she brought her nose closer to his shirt, took a full, brief inhale that took in his mild cologne. She smiled and looked away, making him tuck in the muscles of his abdomen. Discreetly, he lifted his left shoulder close to his nose and breathed in deep.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Elliot," he said.

"Elliot? Like Eliot the poet?"

"More like an aspiring rapper. I'm from New York, visiting Nairobi for a few months, and then I'll go back by January."

"You smell nice, Elliot!" she said.

George Mulatwa thought adorning oneself with cologne was

childish, not sexy. He despised it perhaps as much as lying, a trait that came to Elliot almost naturally. But to smell and feel fresh in the company of his lover was more important than any truth that could bind Elliot to his brother.

He goes into the shower and stands beneath the warm water, eyes shut to block out Mulatwa's face. He wants to think only of the better days with Awinja, when he had a stint at a local bank, when he had worked for a three-month contract until they said they were no longer hiring. A few contracts later in banks, NGOs, academia, the word "contract" became something he mentioned bitterly.

The falling water quickly washes the lather from his body, and he barely scrubs his back or even his feet before jumping out of the shower. He dresses quickly, wearing a long white T-shirt with his faded blue jeans. His signature is his shoes. He has been to Mr. Price and Avilas in search of the latest fashion. But on the first Friday of every month he wakes up at five in the morning to make sure to be at the Gikomba market before the stalls open. A haven for copycats, it's never hard to find something fancy and new. And Elliot has always been lucky, although he sometimes finds it hard to explain to Awinja the particular shop in Westlands where he gets each pair. Today he chooses something from Salvatore Ferragamo Italia. He tries to stick the loose label back on with super glue, but the paper tears. He is too impatient to join the two halves correctly, so he just leaves them. He stands before the mirror and sprays his armpits, only lightly, so the cologne falls like a soft cloak around him.

He takes the path that connects the old Roysambu with the new. On each side of the TRM Drive, he sees someone he knows, but he does not stop to catch up, even though he feels he should. The mall being only a five-minute walk from his house, every step he takes draws him closer to George Mulatwa.

He goes into the mall via the back entrance. To his right, a low hum hangs over the food court, teeming with families and lovers cementing their living bonds over choice foods. The Persia Bar and Sheesha Lounge are empty for now, as if carefully preserving themselves for the life-giving night. On the second floor are a variety of shops, but neither the Sports House nor the Elite Digital, which sells the most expensive Apple products, interest him as they once did. He

just needs to see Mulatwa in his *office*, and he walks straight to the third stall in the hallway. Mulatwa sees him and nods, but then turns immediately to a customer, demanding to know whether the sixth season of *Game of Thrones* is out. Mulatwa always wears a smile that brightens his face and makes his flabby cheeks seem oily. Two girls flip through booklets of printed posters and make their orders. Every now and then they turn and smile at Elliot.

Mulatwa turns finally to Elliot and addresses him as if continuing a monologue he was already having in his head.

“I have decided to raise some money to expand this business. Fuck corporate Kenya. I will do my own shit. And I am counting on you, bro. Pay me what you owe me now, it’s been too long, bro.”

“What are you looking to raise?”

“Three hundred thousand. I got a very good deal with a larger shop that will be vacant in the mall by next month. Man, so much space to explore what this business can become. And you have my fifteen K.”

“But I told you about my job situation, Mulatwa.”

Just as his phone rings, Elliot remembers with a deep sense of sadness and confusion that he’d told Mulatwa about a new six-figure salaried job he had gotten earlier in the month from some business associates of his father.

The phone rings again. Awinja. He does not answer and texts follow almost immediately. If he can’t make it in an hour, she might go with her girlfriends to a birthday party out of town.

“Look, Mulatwa, I need 5K urgently. My boss will pay me by the twenty-eighth and all my other money will mature by the twenty-eighth as well. I will sort you out, man.”

“You want me to give you 5K? Now?”

Mulatwa shakes his head and raises his voice, and the girls who had been looking at Elliot’s shoes look up at his face.

“Nah man, no no. Not even my mother is getting a cent ‘til my business deal goes through. You understand now, don’t you? And my 15 thousand you have.”

“Fuck!” Elliot curses under his breath.

He walks away fast, not caring about anything that Mulatwa is

saying behind him, or even the giggles he thinks are coming from every face he meets.

He calls Peter, his cab guy, only to realize he does not have credit on his phone. He is fortunate to have one more chance to use Safaricom's Okoa Jahazi service. Thank the universe for small miracles. He and Peter have done business on many occasions, and Elliot is confident about navigating the crisis.

He does not go up when Peter parks outside Awinja's house.

"Honey," Elliot says when he calls her on the phone, "I'm downstairs."

"Just a minute, sweetheart! We'll be out in a bit."

For close to forty-five minutes, Elliot negotiates a fair price to keep Peter there.

But each passing minute seems to make Peter angrier, unwilling to be kept waiting even as he keeps negotiating the price. Finally he settles for three thousand, but he will leave to do other runs and pick them up when they are done drinking. Elliot is eager to agree. Half now, half later is what Peter wants. Period.

When she walks out into the cold breeze dressed in hot pants, Awinja is accompanied by Carol, a friend Elliot has seen only once before. A few boys seated outside Sam's Shop stop talking and stare. Heads turn even among the women who are returning from the mama mboga. Awinja wears high heels brought in from Paris by her parents whom she sees once every few years. She walks with long but steady footsteps, opening the door for herself before Elliot can do it.

Their conversation in the car barely involves Elliot, except for the occasional "Don't you think so, honey?" from Awinja. They analyze and overanalyze television, and all the latest misadventures by the town socialites. Elliot glances at the back seat once in a while, and Carol always seems to wink at him, raising her leg rather slowly as if daring him to look in between. In ten minutes they are at the Mountain Mall. Elliot lingers, and speaks to Peter for a while. They take the lift to Club Comfort on the third floor, and sit at a table close to the dance floor.

Elliot stands to follow the waiter who has taken their orders, in a conversation that seems both longer and more heated than neces-

sary. When he sits down his phone won't stop ringing. He fumbles in his pockets and disconnects the calls. Awinja grabs it.

"What the fuck? Why are you not picking the cabbie's call?"

There is more surprise than anger in her voice. Elliot excuses himself and goes downstairs to Peter. Still wearing his green sweater that makes him look like an overgrown high school kid, Peter stands outside his car.

"I want my money now. And don't keep me waiting; I have work to do."

"Calm down Peter. Calm down."

Elliot takes his hand and leads him aside, even though there is no one else around who would overhear them. They have a long conversation, Elliot spewing words in unadulterated Kikamba. Peter thinks that they may be from the same village even.

"I understand you," Peter says finally, "but I have to work and I can't stand here waiting for you all night."

"Okay, take us to Westlands. I will give you all your money for the night there. The ATM here is not working."

Awinja shakes off his hand when Elliot tries to lead her off the dance floor. She almost clings to the pot-bellied man she is dancing with, her hand roving into his back pocket, stuffed with a huge wallet. The man whispers in her ear, and she smiles each time, pushing Elliot behind her. But as they walk out she takes a long sip of her drink and shakes her head. The waiter is still trailing Elliot with the bill, so he asks Carol to lead Awinja out. He joins them almost twenty minutes later.

"What is going on, Elliot?" Awinja screams. "What is this mysterious bullshit you are giving us? Ah?"

She grabs his hand.

"Talk to me. Okay. Tell me what the fuck is going on."

"We are going to Westlands, okay. It's better fun there."

In Westlands the girls are asked to wait upstairs in the Aqua Club. Carol jumps on the dance floor and begins to shake her bum, imitating the video vixens on the TV screens, doing it to "German Juice." Awinja sits in the VIP section and orders a glass of red wine. Elliot goes back downstairs to talk to Peter, who is pushing his way past the bouncers at the door.

“Yo, what’s up guys? This here is my cab guy. Let me sort him out.”

Elliot speaks with a practiced accent, a pathetic copy of American gangster rappers. But Peter is shouting at him now. His Kikuyu words are distorted by anger, and even when Elliot takes him aside he does not quiet down.

“Look, look, Peter. Look, I will give you my phone, and then you can return it to me when I pay you tomorrow. Okay?”

“Phone. I don’t want your phone. I want my money, you fool. You want me to forget that last month you did not pay me for a whole week straight?”

“Fuck. Peter. Fuck.”

“Don’t curse me you empty-headed fool.”

“Peter. You know me now. This phone I am giving you is worth forty-nine thousand.

“You think . . .”

“Bring it.”

Peter grabs it and walks to the taxi. Elliot does not move for a minute. When he turns Awinja is standing there looking at him, frozen with anger. Carol is behind Awinja, making faces.

“What’s going on?” Awinja asks.

“Nothing. Nothing.” Elliot’s voice is almost shaking. “Why are you not upstairs drinking?”

“The waiter brought the bill. She says she does not want to hear that you are the one paying. You have a debt from last week and the week before.”

“A debt?”

“Who the fuck has a debt in a night club?”

“Hey, there is some confusion here.”

“Alright. Why has Peter left? And why did he take your phone with him?”

“Listen, babe. Listen. I just didn’t come into the cash I was hoping for.”

Awinja starts to walk away. Elliot follows, trying to hold her hand and not caring much for revelers that have started to snoop.

“I want to go home.” Awinja says. “Please get me a cab!”

“I was thinking we should first take a matatu to town, and then from there we will get a cab to your place.”



“Me? On a matatu? You think I dressed like this so that I can get into a matatu?”

Elliot’s eyes rove all over the place. He turns to Carol for help, but the girl does not wink or smile at him anymore. Neither girl wants to talk to him, so he waves down the first cab he sees and they all get in. As they cruise down Forest Road to the super highway Elliot reaches out to Awinja.

“Please honey, just understand. I wanted to make you see that I love you.”

“You wanted to be a hero? Yes?”

Elliot leans into her chest and he begins to sob slowly. A sigh escapes Awinja, who takes his head against her and calms her voice. The cab driver says nothing. If he is worried about the possibility of unpaid labor he does not show it. When they arrive, he does not say anything either. Elliot is more worried by this than noisy demands. When he reaches for something beneath the seat, Elliot feels his heartbeat rise. He once heard rumors of a taxi driver who had a gun in his car and stole his clients’ belongings. Here, they have nothing but their lives.

“Take my number,” the taxi driver says, “and pay me tomorrow.”

There is a collective sigh of relief. The night brightens, and Awinja does not move away when Elliot places his hand around her waist. They part with the taxi driver with an elated mood they don’t believe they deserve, and as Carol walks towards her flat alone, Elliot holds Awinja’s hand.

“The night has finally gotten better.” Elliot says. “Let’s have fun and forget all this shit.”

Awinja gets into the shower immediately after they step into the house. When she comes back to her room, she finds Elliot wrapped in the spare towel. She walks up to him and gives him a peck.

“Why don’t you take a shower first,” she says.

“Alright, my love.”

He showers too fast, like he always does when he is not sharing it with her. In five minutes he is done. He finds her bedroom door locked. He can see a blanket has been thrown on the couch. He knocks on the door, slowly at first, but receiving no reply, he knocks harder.

She does not answer. He sits there outside of her bedroom for an hour, begging for her to open, and not once does she answer. But he can hear her inside. Sometimes she sneezes, sometimes she screams.

*Fuck!*

He walks out of the house at two in the morning, with the coins from the jar that sits beside the TV. He gets into a matatu going to town, the only other passenger in the fourteen-seater with music so loud it feels like a violation to the sanctity of the night.

He is dropped in the heart of a city whose caged demons suffocate his soul. And he walks faster and faster towards the girls that line Koinange Street, his eyes bulging as though the wider he opens them the easier it will be to see Aggy among them, the fading memory of his only blood relation. And as his heart sinks deeper into the abyss, his ears are shut temporarily by the shrill, initial swish of a stray bullet, and then the penetrating pain of another through his right shoulder, driving him to his knees. His last image is of Aggy, running towards him screaming. With joy or pain he does not know. And then slowly the night grows so dark and quiet he feels himself fall into a soft, swallowing infinity.



**Abdilatif Abdalla**

*Kuno Kunena, Speaking Out |  
Telezi, Slipperiness | Kibaruwa,  
Casual Laborer | Ungapomoka,  
Although It Has Fallen*

*Translated by* **Kelly Askew**  
*and* **Abdilatif Abdalla**



## **Kuno Kunena**

Kuno kunena kwa nini, kukanikomeya kuno?  
Kwani kunena kunani, kukashikwa kani vino?  
Kani iso na kiini, na kuninuniya mno  
Kanama nako kunena, kwaonekana ni kuwi

Kana na kuku kunena, kunenwa kakutakiwi  
Kuna wanakokuona, kunena kwamba si kuwi  
Kunena wakikuona, kukuita kawakawi  
Kunena kana kwanuka, nikukome kukunena?

*- 19 Julai 1970*

## **Speaking Out**

Why has speaking out provoked my imprisonment?  
What therein compelled my confinement?  
Invalid insistence incited anger against me  
Apparently speaking out is viewed with contempt

Speaking out may be distasteful to some  
Yet others do not regard it negatively  
Encountering each other, they hesitate not to embrace  
So if speaking out stinks, should I shut up?

*– 30 October 2014, Ann Arbor, MI*

## Telezi

1

Mvuwa iliyonyesha, ya maradi na ngurumo  
Kutwa na kucha kukesha, kunyesha pasi kipimo  
Haikuwanufaisha, wenye kazi za vilimo  
Wenye kazi za vilimo, walifikwa na hasara

2

Mimeya waloipanda, ilitekukatekuka  
Kazi ngumu walotenda, yote ikaharibika  
Hawakuvuna matunda, waliyo wakiyataka  
Waliyo wakiyataka, yakawa ya mbali nao

3

Wenye kuicha mvuwa, isiwatose mwilini  
Baadhi yao wakawa, wakimbiliya penuni  
Wengine hawakutuwa, hadi mwao majumbani  
Hadi mwao majumbani, na kukomeya milango

4

Wenzangu dhihaka kando, nisemayo ni yakini  
Ilibwaga kubwa shindo, mvuwa hiyo jamani  
Na mijaji kwa mikondo, yakawa barabarani  
Yakawa barabarani, mvuwa kwisha kunyesha

5

Kunyesha iliposiya, kukatapakaa tope  
Zilijaa kila ndiya, isibakiye nyeupe  
Ukawa mwingi udhiya, pa kupita zisitupe  
Pa kupita zisitupe, kwa ndiya kukosekana

6

Japo hivyo zilikuwa, ndiya hazipitiki  
Bali mimi haamuwa, kwenenda japo kwa dhiki  
Kumbe vile nitakuwa, ni mfano wa samaki  
Ni mfano wa samaki, kuiendeya ndowana

7

Zikanibwaga telezi, sikujuwa kuzendeya  
Ningekwenda kwa henezi, yasingemfika haya  
Lakini tena siwezi, mwendo huo kutumiya  
Sitawata kutembeya, ila tabadili mwendo

– 3 Agosti 1970



## Slipperiness

The rain that fell amidst frightening thunder and lightning  
In endless quantity from dawn to dusk  
Offered no benefit to those tilling the land  
Those tilling the land suffered great loss

Seedlings they had planted were uprooted in the deluge  
All their hard work came to naught  
They harvested none of the fruit they anticipated  
The fruit they anticipated remained beyond their reach

Those who feared the rain, lest it drench their bodies  
Ran hastily for cover  
While others wouldn't rest 'til their homes they reached  
'Til their homes they reached and closed the doors shut

Friends, jokes aside, what I am saying truly happened  
It carved a deep chasm, this tremendous storm  
And the strong currents overflowed in the streets  
Overflowed in the streets, even after the rain had ceased

When the rain had stopped it was muddy all over  
Mud filled every road, not leaving a single path clean  
So inconvenient it was, that we could not discern the way  
We could not discern the way, due to impassable roads

Though that is how it was, with roads that were impassable  
Still I decided to proceed, despite the hardships  
Little did I know, I would be like a fish  
I would be like a fish, taking itself onto the hook

I fell on the slippery ground. I did not know how to navigate it  
Had I been more cautious, I might have avoided what befell me  
But I will never again walk in that fashion  
I will not stop walking, though I will change my approach

— 3 August 1970, Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, Nairobi,  
Kenya

## Kibaruwa

Kwenye shamba hilo kubwa asilani hakunyi mvuwa  
Ni kwa mitilizi ya jasho langu ndiyo hunweshzewa  
Kwenye shamba hilo kubwa sasa imeshaiva kahawa  
Na bunize ni matone ya damu yangu niliyotowa  
Ndipo mte ukatipuza

Buni hiyo itakaangwa buni hiyo itapondwapondwa  
Buni hiyo itasagwa na buni hiyo itafyondwafyondwa  
Bali itabaki nyeusi kama ngozi yangu Kibaruwa

Waulize ndege kwa nyimbo nyanana watutumbuizao  
Iulize na mito kwa furaha maji itiririkao  
Uulize na upepo mkali kwa ghadhabu uvumao -  
Viulize: Ni nani araukaye na mapema kuzitema mbuga na  
kuzilaza?  
Viulize: Ni nani akweaye minazi tangu kuchapo hadi lingiapo giza?  
Viulize: Ni nani abebeshwaye mizigo hadi maungo yakageuka shaza?  
Halafuye hana faida moja apatayo wala malipo yanayotosheleza -  
Isipokuwa kusundugwa na kutupiwa matambara na vyakula  
vilivyoza?  
Viulize: Ni nani huyo ni nani!

Viulize: Ni nani ayalimaye mashamba na kuyapalilia?  
Na mimea kochokocho ikajaa kwa uzito ikajinamia?  
Hatimaye nani atajirikaye mali yakammiminikia  
Akaota na kitambi kama mja mzito wa miezi tisia  
Na akaongeza magari na wanawake kutoka na kuingia?  
Viulize: Ni nani huyo ni nani!

Na hao ndege kwa nyimbo nyanana watutumbuizao  
Nayo hiyo mito kwa furaha maji itiririkao  
Na huo upepo mkali wenye ghadhabu uvumao  
Vyote hivyo vitatu vitakujibu kwa umoja wao:  
“Ni Kibaruwa Manamba ndiye mtendaji hayo!”

— 1980s, *London*

## Casual Laborer

It never rains on that vast field  
With streams of my sweat it is watered  
And in that vast field coffee trees are ready for harvesting  
And the coffee beans are drops of my blood that I have shed  
Enabling seedlings to sprout

Those coffee beans will be roasted, those coffee beans will be  
pounded  
Those coffee beans will be sucked, those coffee beans will be  
ground  
But they will remain black as the color of my skin, the laborer

Ask the birds that serenade us with sweet songs  
Ask the rivers that happily flow with water  
Ask the strong wind that blows with fury  
Ask them: who is the one who wakes early and clears the bush?  
Ask them: who is it that climbs the coconut trees from daybreak to  
dusk?  
Ask them: who is made to carry loads 'til his back is rough like  
coral?  
And then receives no benefit, is not paid a fair wage  
Only insulted and tossed tattered clothes and rotten food  
Ask them: who is that?

Ask them: who is it that cultivates and weeds the fields?  
The plants fruiting so abundantly that they bend with the weight?  
Finally, who gets rich with wealth pouring down upon him?  
Developing a potbelly like a nine-month pregnancy?  
Rotating through a growing number of cars and women?  
Ask them: who is that?

And those birds that serenade us with sweet songs  
And those rivers that happily flow with water

And that strong wind that blows with fury  
All those three will answer you in unison:  
“It’s the indentured laborer who did all that!”

— 1980s, *London*

*The following poem **Ungapomoka** was written by AA while on a three-month study tour in Mainz, in August 1978, while still on the faculty at UDSM<sup>1</sup>. He received a letter from E. Kezilahabi telling him the news that President Jomo Kenyatta had just died. He wrote this poem in response.*

## **Ungapomoka**

Na mti uangukapo, ungapomoka, pomoko kuu  
Taharuki lingawapo, na shabuka, mbasi kwa nduu  
Hakwambwi kwa majitapo, kufurahika, ni ubuzyuu  
Kwani miziye i papo, itatipuka, yenende juu  
Na yaliyopo yawepo, pasi kwondoka, na mti huu!

— 1978, Mainz

## **Although It Has Fallen**

Though the tree has fallen with a resounding thud  
Though anxiety and worry beset friends and family  
One should not speak of it with certitude; rejoicing is foolhardy  
Because its roots are still intact, producing new shoots  
And what is there will remain, not disappearing with the falling of  
the tree!

—April 2013, Berlin

---

<sup>1</sup>University of Dar es Salaam.



Reem Bassiouney

رسالة الى السيد "ف" *Letter to*  
*Mr. "F"*

بطاطس مقلية *French Fries*

حتى الساعة السابعة *Until Seven*  
*o'Clock*

*Translated by Xiaoxi Zhang*





## رسالة الى السيد "ف"

الى السيد الاستاذ "ف"

تحية طيبة وبعد،

لقد اذلتني.. حطمت حياتي

كنت اظن يوما انني امرأة سعيدة.. هادئة ومتعلقة.. لم أكن أظن يوما أنني هكذا..

كيف بدأت القصة؟ أنتذكر؟

بدأت يوم أتيت من عملي كعادتي وبدأت في اعداد العشاء.. دون أن أفكر للحظة من أكون وأين أكون فأنا هكذا دائما أعمل في ميكانيكية، أنا والموقد لا نختلف كثيرا.. كلانا يحترق في صمت.. وكلانا بارد من الخارج... ما ان بدأت في اعداد الغذاء حتى وقعت عيني على شيء غريب.. وراء دولاب المطبخ.. بلغت ريقى في فزع.. بقايا طعام.. شخصا أكله ثم القى بالبقايا.. بل خبئها في هذا المكان.. رجل.. ربما.. حرامي في بيتي.. أكل بطريقة هادئة.. شامخة.. أكل اللحم الابيض للدجاجة فقط.. ترك الأرز وأكل اللحم.. حاولت أن أتجاهل هذه الحادثة.. واستمرت حياتي يومين.. ثم تكررت الحادثة من جديد.. من يفعل هذا؟ وماذا يقصد.. زوجي.. الخادمة.. أولادي.. لا أدري.. لا أدري.. ولكن ليت الطعام كان المشكلة الوحيدة بل بدأت أسمع أصواتا غريبة في البيت.. هناك شخص ما يسكن بيتنا.. في ميكانيكية.. اقتنعت تماما أن البيت مسكون! هذه أعمال جن يسكن معنا و يسخر مني.. إلى من ألجأ؟ وجدت نفسي في ميكانيكية أيضا ألجأ لأخي.. سيثسفى في، أعرف ذلك، فلم أكن يوما أحبه ولكنني حكيت له كل شيء، تأثر وتهدب وذهب في وجوم.. عاد في اليوم التالي وهمس في ألم "نعم.. مسكون.. امرأة تريد زوجك.. هي من أمرت هذا الجن بأن يفعل هذا.. وسوف يفعل الكثير... ألا تلاحظين أن أولادكم لا يطبق بعضهم.. البعض.. و زوجك .." قاطعته في ضيق: إذا كانت تريد زوجي فلنأخذة.. إنه رجل لا يطاق على كل حال.. ولكن لماذا تعذبني.. لماذا ؟ لقد تغير كل شيء في البيت كما قلت، أصبح كل منأ يكره الآخر.. كل هذا من أجل زوجي؟

بدأت مرحلة جديدة من حياتي.. كل يوم أنهي عملي مبكرا.. ثم ألتهت وراء الدجالين فيقولون كلهم نفس الشيء.. حاولت وحاولت.. وبالتالي تدرج بدأت حركة الجن تقل بعض الشيء.. وتنفست الصعداء من جديد في خوف من كل شيء حولي.. ثم عاد.. عاد أكثر ضراوة وأشد قسوة.. عاد الجن و بدأت أرجوه.. بالساعات وأبكي.. تارة أفنقه بالشتائم وتارة أرجوه.. لن أتركه يقتلني.. شعرت أن كل من حولي يتآمرون علي... كلهم.. الخادمة.. أطفالي.. وهو... زوجي هذا.. وكل يوم.. أجد شيئا ما مختلفا في بيتي.. كل يوم أنتظر قدوم الجن وخطواته!

بدأ من حولي يظن أنني مجنونة... ولكنني أمسكت بيد زوجي.. جعلته يرى بعينه بقايا طعام الجن.. طعام لم أطبخه.. هو أتى به من أسفل الأرض.. فهو جن أرضي.. فتح زوجي فمه في ذهول فصرخت في وجهه: لماذا تريدك؟ ألا تعرف حقيقتك؟ ألا تعرف أنني أحمل العبء كله؟ وانت لا تفعل شيئا سوى تحطيم أحلامي.. إنني أكرهك.. لم أحبك يوما!

نظر لي في ذهول.. لم يكن جميلا و لم يكن قبيحا.. كان رجلا عاديا لا يوجد به أي شيء مميز لذا تزوجته ولذا لم أعد أريده.. لم أعد أريد رجلا عاديا.

وما هي أحلامي التي حطمها؟ وهل كان عندي أحلام؟ لم أعد أنام.. أسمع صوته في كل لحظة.. هذا الجن.. السيد "ف"، هكذا أطلقت عليه.. لم يعد شيئاً ينفع.. علي أن أترك زوجي و أترك الشقة.. وأين سأذهب أنا وأولادي؟

تركت عملي.. أصبح شغلي الشاغل هو السيد "ف" .. لا بد أن يجيبني.. لماذا يقسو علي هكذا؟ ألا يكفي أنني لم أعد أريد شيئاً.. لا بد أن أراه!

و جاء اليوم الذي كنت أتوق إليه.. رأيته.  
وأنا جالسة أحمق في الحائط في يأس..  
شعرت بحمل على أرجلي.. بأرجل صغيرة تلذعني.. تقتلني

"فأرأفأر! أنقذوني!"

كان فأرا إذن.. فأرا.. حطم شيئاً بداخلي.. فأرا جعلني أتصرف بهستيرية.. لم أكن لأستريح حتى أراه أمامي  
جثة هامدة! سأنتقم منه هذا القاسي.. سأفعل  
وجاء أخي بالسم.  
أسفة يا سيد "ف" ولكنك قاس!

وشكرا!

همس السيد "ف" في لحظاته الأخيرة "سيدتي أنا بريء" ومات.

## LETTER TO MR. "F"

To the esteemed Mr. "F,"

Greetings,

You humiliated me. You destroyed my life.

I once thought every day I was a happy woman . . . quiet and prudent. I never thought I was like this.

How does the story begin? Do you remember?

It started one day when I came back from work and was cooking . . . without thinking for a moment who I was and where I came from. I always work like this, mechanically. I am not very different from an incinerator. We both burn silently and are cold on the outside. I was starting to prepare the meal when something strange happened. Behind the kitchen cupboard . . . I swallowed my saliva in panic . . . food! Someone had eaten food and hidden the rest here. A man . . . probably. A thief in my house. He had eaten quietly, loftily. He had eaten only the white chicken meat. . . . He had left the rice and eaten the meat. I tried to ignore it. . . . My life went on for two

more days. Then I remembered it again. Who did this? What does this mean . . . my husband . . . the maid . . . my children . . . I don't know . . . I don't know. I wished the food were the only problem but I began to hear strange noises. There was someone living in our house. My first reaction was to be convinced the house was haunted! This was the work of a genie who had taken up residence to mock me. To whom should I turn? I resorted to my brother. He would not be of any help, I knew, since I had never loved him, but I told him everything anyway. He was troubled, sighed, and left in silence. He came back the next day and whispered with difficulty: Yes . . . it is haunted . . . a woman desires your husband . . . she called upon genie . . . he is doing all this. Didn't you notice your children cannot stand each other . . . and your husband . . .

I cut him off, if she wants my husband, let her have him. He is unbearable after all . . . But why does she torture me . . . Why? Everything in the house has changed, everything between us is hatred . . . All this because of my husband?

A new stage of my life began. Every day I finish work early. Then I breathed behind the antichrist since they all say the same thing . . . I tried and tried . . . Gradually the genie's activity tapered off. I breathed a sigh of relief in fear of everything around me. Then he came back, fiercer and more severely. The genie came back and I started to beg him . . . for hours and hours and to cry. . . . Sometimes I cursed him and sometimes I entreated him . . . I will not let him kill me . . . I felt that everything was conspiring against me . . . all of them . . . the maid . . . my children . . . and him . . . that husband of mine. Every day, I found something different in my house. Every day I waited for the genie and his footsteps!

People started to think I was crazy. But I held my husband's hand. I forced him to see the remains of the genie's food with his own eyes. The food I did not cook. It had come with him from beneath the earth. My husband opened his mouth in astonishment and I screamed at him: Why does she want you? Doesn't she know who you are? Doesn't she know that I bear the burden? That you have done nothing but smash my dreams. I hate you! I never loved you, not even for one day!

He looked at me in astonishment. He wasn't handsome and he

wasn't ugly. He was an average man, nothing special. I married him and no longer wanted him. I no longer wanted an average man.

What were those smashed dreams of mine? Had I ever had a dream? I no longer sleep. I hear his voice every moment . . . this genie . . . Mr. "F" as I call him. Nothing helps. I have to leave my husband and the apartment . . . where can I go with my children?

I quit my work . . . Mr. "F" has become all I can think about. He must answer me. Why is he hardening me like this? Isn't it enough that I no longer want anything? I had to see him!

So the day came when I . . . I saw him. I was sitting beside the wall in despair . . . I felt a weight on my legs . . . I felt a little leg tickling me . . . killing me . . .

"Mouse! Mouse! Save me!"

It was a mouse so . . . a mouse. He destroyed something within me . . . the mouse made me act hysterically . . . I couldn't rest until I saw his corpse before me! Lifeless! I will avenge this hardness. I will do it. My brother came with poison. Sorry Mr. "F" but you are cruel!

And thank you!

In his last moments Mr. "F" whispered, "My Miss, I am innocent," and he died.

## بطاطس مقليه

لا شيء يثير ضيقي كالنساء، وخاصة زوجتي، يتسبب منها الكره لي.. أعرف ذلك.. رأيتة في عينيها منذ ثلاثين عاما ولم أزل أراه في عينيها وسوف أراه في عينيها. تكرهني هذه المرأة ثم ماذا؟

تنوي أن تقضي علي.. ستقتلني ستفعل عاجلا أو أجلا ستفعل وقد اختارت الوقت المناسب. هرم مثلي في السادسة والستين لن يقو على المقاومة.

أين أيام شبابي عندما كنت أصرخ في وجهها فتدمع عينيها ويتصبب منها العرق وتكشم فتذكرني بطبق "الكرشة" الممتلية بالصلصة. ولا أبالي، لم أكن أبالي.

لا تحاول أن تهديء امرأة تبكي، سوف تظن أنك رجل ضعيف. ستقتلني يوما هذه المرأة.. أرى هذا في عينيها. تزوجتها لماذا؟ لأن أنفها رقيق.. ولماذا يتزوج الرجل من المرأة؟ دائما من أجل أنفها والآن بعد أن التهم الروماتيزم ظهري... وذراعي وأرجلي أصبحت كالأسد الجريح والصيدا يستمتع بألقاء السهام على أسد جريح. والزوجة تريد أن تستمتع بضعفي.. لن أترك لها الفرصة قلت لها مرارا إن صوت الملعقة يثير أعصابي وهاهي تقلب الشاي في لامبالاة وكأنها لا تقصد إثارة أعصابي القاسية! في شيخوختي تريد الانتقام!

"إبني اكرهك" قالتها لي كثيرا وكان جزاؤها في الماضي صفعه قوية كصفعات أفلام زمان. كانت بعدها تدمع في صمت، القاسية تريد النيل مني الآن. ولم تزل تقلب الشاي بالملعقة يف لامبالاه. صوت الملعقة يصم أذني

"كفي عن هذا!"

لم تسمعني

"يا امرأة كفي عن هذا"

ابتسمت في هدوء وأخذت تقلب الشاي ثم همست: إنني أقلب كوب الشاي ألم تطلب مني شايًا؟

وضعت به سما.. سأبلغ البوليس.. سأفعل.. ابن إولادي؟ لماذا تركوها تنال مني؟ ارتجفت يدي دائما ترتجف هذه الأيام. ليت يدي لا ترتجف أمامها.

حملت في يدي المرتجفة.. تسخر مني.. تتشفى في ضعفي.. ستدفع الثمن.. سأقتلها أنا أو لا!

نعم.. ولكن كيف؟

حرقا ربما ولم لا؟

سوف أطلب منها شيئاً، أي شيء ثم تشعل نار الموقد ثم أتصرف أنا..

قلت في صرامة: أريد بطاطس مقلية الآن.

حملت في دهشة ثم اتجهت الى المطبخ، اشعلت النار، وضعت الطاسة ثم الزيت. صوت الزيت يؤلمني كصوت زوجتي تماماً. يا هي الساعة قد حانت، اتكأت على العصا. اتجهت إلى المطبخ. نظرت إلى السكين التي في يدها تتطع بها البطاطس ثم تلقي بها في الزيت فيتلوى. يحترق. اغمضت عيني. رائحة البطاطاس جميلة.

ليس علي أن أقتلها الآن..ربما بعد أن أكل البطاطس ثم ألا يكفي أنني شفيت غليلي ورأيت البطاطس تتلوى أما؟ ساكل البطاطس أو لا و ربما أجعلها تأكل معي فأنا أكره أن أكل بمفرد ولنوجل القتل.

ابتسمت لها في كبرياء فودت الایتسامة

همست لها: إنك لست شديدة القسوة على كل حال..كل النساء قاسيات، لن ألومك على شيء ليس بيدك..متى سناكل البطاطس؟

## FRENCH FRIES

Nothing is as troubling as women, and my wife especially, nothing but hatred comes from her towards me . . . I know that. I saw the hatred in her eyes from thirty years ago, I still see it in her eyes, and I will still see it in the future. This woman hates me, then what?

She wants to eliminate me . . . She will kill me sooner or later, she will, and she has chosen the right time. An old man like me at the age of sixty-six will not have the strength to resist.

Where are the days of my youth when I yelled in her face and her eyes would blink, and she would sweat and shrink and then remind me of my dish. The “kursha” full of sauce. I didn’t care, I never really cared.

Do not try to calm a crying woman, for she will take you to be a weak man. This woman she will kill me one day . . . I see this in her eyes. Why did I marry her? Because her nose is petite. And why should a man marry a woman? Always because of her nose. After rheumatism devoured my back . . . and my arm and my legs, I became a wounded lion, and the hunter enjoys throwing arrows at a wounded lion, and this wife of mine wants to take advantage of my distress. I will not leave this chance to her. I told her repeatedly that the sound of the spoon gets on my nerves and here she stirs the tea indifferently, as if she doesn’t care about my stirring nerves. Cruel! She wants to avenge when I am senile!

“I hate you!” She often said this to me. And her recompense in the past used to be a strong blow in the face, like the blows in the old-time movies. After that she would weep in silence, so cruel that she wants to get rid of me now. And the way she stirs the tea with her spoon is not indifferent. The sound of the spoon deafens my ears.

“Enough of this!”

She didn’t hear me.

“Woman, this is enough!”

She smiled quietly, stirred the tea and then whispered: “I am stirring a cup of tea, didn’t you ask me for tea?”

She put poison in it . . . I will call the police . . . I will. Where are my children? Why they let her get back at me? My hands trembled as they often do these days. Would my hands not tremble in front of her!

I clasped my trembling hands. She makes fun of me . . . She heals in my weakness . . . She will pay the price. Will I kill her or not! Yes . . . but how?

Burning maybe, and why not?

I will ask for something from her, anything, and then she would turn on the fire at the stove, then I take my action . . .

Sternly, I said: “I want French fries, now!”

She was astonished and then turned to the kitchen. She turned on the fire, put the pan on it and then the oil . . . the sound of the oil hurts me just like the sound of my wife. The hour has come, I leaned on the stick . . . I turned to the kitchen . . . I saw the knife in her hands which she used to cut the potatoes and then she took them to the oil, and they twisted, burned . . . I closed my eyes . . . The fries smell wonderful.

I should not kill her now . . . maybe after I eat the fries . . . isn’t it enough that I get back at her. I looked at the fries squirming out of pain. I will eat the French fries first, maybe I will let her eat with me, since I hate eating by myself. So let’s postpone the killing.

I smiled at her proudly and she smiled back.

I whispered to her: “You are not very cruel anyhow . . . all women are cruel. I am not going to blame you for things beyond your control . . . When will we eat the fries?”



## حتى الساعة السابعة

يقولون إنه يريدني في شيء هام. رجل غريب حقاً. إنني بالكاد أعرفه. رأيته مرة أو مرتين وأنا أعطي ابن مدير منزله درساً خصوصياً، يقولون إن مصيبة قد حلت على رأسه. فقد كل أمواله، كان يقوم بأعمال غير مشروعة.. سينتهي به الأمر في السجن.. بل هو شيوعي، بل اقطاعي، المال ينسكب من بدلتة الأثيقة.. استقرطي، والده كان وزيراً للداخلية سابق، بل صاحب أراضٍ.. على كل، صوته هو ما يعجبني فيه. لا يصرخ أبداً. صوته كحروف الآلة الكاتبة تأتي كلها متساوية. ترى لماذا يريدني؟ أخرجت المرأة حملقت في شعري المفروق من الوسط.. حملقت في عيوني الذابلة، بدا السن عليهما. "الحياة خدعتك وشطبت ثلاثين عاماً من عمرك" لم يحاول أحد أن يغازلني منذ زمن. المشكلة أنني لست كبقية البنات.. حمقاء، لا أعرف الطرق الملتوية للنساء. ترى لماذا يريدني هذا الرجل؟

الساعة الآن الخامسة.

جلست في انتظار الرجل.. دخل.. ابتسم لي في فتور جلس أمامي، ثم ساد الصمت. عيناه غريبة حقاً فهي كسن القلم الرصاص المبري بعناية. همس للخادمة: أريد طبق فستق ثم العشاء. الرجل مجنون حقاً.. عشاء ماذا؟ هل يظن أنني واحدة من هؤلاء؟ تكلمت.. لم يجب. أخذ ينظر حوله في حيرة طفل أخرجوه من عالمه البريء إلى عالم لا يعرفه ولا يفهمه ثم قال في صرامة: لن تذهبي اليوم. بلعت ربقي في ذهول وقلت: ماذا؟

- لأن تذهبي اليوم.. يا.. قلت لي ما اسمك؟ اعزيني أنني أنسى بسرعة هذه مشكلتي، فهناك أشياء تشغل بالي هذه الأيام، أردتك لأعقد معك صفقة. (وأنا من ظننت أن الحظ قد ابتسم لي أخيراً!)  
ثم استرسل: ما رأيك في الحياة؟

فتحت فمي فقال مسرعاً: هل أكلت من قبل طبق فلافل؟ ما أظها.

- استأذ..

قاطعني: سأجعلك تتذوقين اليوم صلصلة الغسوق.. هل جربتيتها من قبل؟ إنني أعشق الفستق لذا تجديني دائماً أكله على العشاء.. رز بالفستق، سلطة بالفستق، صلصلة بالفستق، لحم بالفستق، وفستق! قلت لي ما اسمك؟ قمت في هدوء لأفتح الباب و أخرج فالرجل يبدو مجنوناً ولكنه أمسك بيدي في برائته الغريبة و.. همس في رقة لم أكن أعرفها: أرجوك لا تذهبي أنني أحتاجك.

بلعت ربقي.. خرجت مني رجة ثم ابتسمت لنفسي... يحبني بالطبع!

ألثقت حوله من جديد في حيرة، نادى على الخادمة وسأل: هل جاء المأذون أم لم يأت بعد؟  
قالت في خوف: جاء يا سيدي.

وجدت اطرافي ترتجف وهويت الى المقعد في ذهول.. أكان يحبني منذ زمن ولم أكن أدري؟

قال وهو يجلس أمامي في حماس غريب وهو يلوح بيده في عصبية كطفل يريد شيئاً: سنتزوج الآن.. هل جربتي عصير الفستق.. إنه جميل.

قلت في تلقائية: أنا لا أوافق!

- لماذا؟ ألا تحبينني؟ لا تقولي إنك لا تحبينني.. لقد رأيت الحب في عينيك.. أنا لا أنسى شيئاً رأيته!

فتحت فمي ثم أغلقته من جديد. أغمضت عيني ودمعة مريرة تتساقط منهما، حلم غريب هذا!

أقترب مني وهو يهمس: إنني أعرف كل شيء عنك... أحب كل شيء فيك.

تزوجته ولا أدري كيف أكلت الفستق وأنا زوجته ثم طلبت من الخادمة أن تعد لنا طبق فلافل. حملق في

براءة فجلست بجانبه وبدأت أضع الأكل في فمه وكأنه طفل صغير، طاقات حنان لم أكن أعرفها، لم أكن

يوماً حنونة ولكنه رجل غريب!

ابتسم لي.. أشعرني بشعور غريب، أنني "أنا" أدخله عالم لا يعرفه.. أن كل شيء يفعله معي، حتى مذاق

الفلافل غريب وجديد.

ثم همس في رقة وهو يمسك يدي: علي أن أخبرك بشيء هام.. علينا أن نصحو غدا في السابعة صباحاً!

قلت في دهشة وكأنه أبظني من حلم جميل: لماذا؟ أعني.. نسيت... علي.. علي أن أذهب الآن.. والدتي..

قاطعني في ضيق: لا تذهبي الآن.. إنني أحتاجك.

قام في هدوء.. فتح درج مكتبه وأخرج عليتين... أعطاني واحدة ثم فتحها فوجدت فيها خاتماً بديعاً من الماس

الخالص، ارتجفت يدي وأنا أنظر له، فقال هو مسرعاً: تعرفين كم ثمنه؟ ثلثمائة ألف جنيه.. للأسف لن

أستطيع أن أشتريه لك.. لقد اقترضته اليوم.. وسوف أعيده غدا في السابعة!

نظرت له في نفس الدهشة ثم قلت في تردد: لا أفهم.

- يمكنك أن ترتديه حتى السابعة.. ما رأيك يا.. قلت لي ما اسمك؟ أنا أسف أنه مرض النسيان هذا.. هل من

الأفضل أن ترتدي خاتماً ماسياً جميلاً كهذا لساعات فقط، أم من الأفضل أن تحي طوالم حياتك لا تعرفين ما

هو الماس؟

قلت مسرعة: بالطبع من الأفضل أن أرتديه ساعات!

- حياتنا هكذا يا حبيبتي حزمة من الساعات المتناثرة نقترضها ثم نعيدها وأنا قررت أن أعيدها في السابعة

وأنت معي.

ابتسمت في هدوء: نعيد الخاتم نعيد حياتنا.

فتح العلبة الأخرى، بها زجاجة صغيرة، ابتسم وهو يهمس: سم.. سوف أقتل نفسي في السابعة فالساعات

القادمة لي في هذا العالم ستصبح بدون الخاتم لذا علي أن انهيتها. حتى الفستق نفذت كميته، لم يعد يبقى سوى

ساعات وانت معي.

شبهت في فزع: معك أين؟

- لقد اخترتك أنت.  
- لتقتلني؟ إنك..إنك متعب ويانس ، الانتحار لن يفيد..في الصباح..  
- في الصباح سوف استمتع بأعظم انتصاراتي بقدرتي على ان أسيطر على إنسان، في الصباح ستشربين السم معي بارادتك، ويكفيني ما حققته من انتصارات حتى الآن.  
أحمق ومجنون..في الصباح سأبلغ البوليس ليمنعه وحتى لو لم يمنعه فيكفي أنني سأبقى حية..ربما علي أن أرحل الآن، ولم لا أنتظر حتى الصباح؟

كل ما يفعله لن يفجح معي، كلماته غريبة، براءته المصحوبة بحماس شاب وعصبية هرم وضعف طفل. كل هذا لن يفجح معي. عندما أعود.. سوف..سوف أبدا حياة جديدة، فحياتي القديمة كانت شديدة الملل. ربما اتزوج غيره..كان حلمي أن اتزوج و قد تحقق ولن أجد رجلا مثله. ليس علي أن اتزوج إذن. أأحبه؟ هل أبلغ البوليس الآن؟ فلأنتظر ساعتين حتى السابعة. فلأبقى معه حتى السابعة فربما لا أراه بعد الآن. كلماته غريبة. أكاد أفقد صوابي..شيطان هو أم ماذا؟ ماذا أتى بي إلى هنا؟ فلأنتظر حتى السابعة .

حملقت في عينيه فابتسم في ثقة وهمس: تخافين؟

قلت في يأس: فات أوان الخوف فقد شربت السم.

- لم يزل أمامك نصف ساعة.

- قلت في فتور: لقد وعدتني أنني لن اتألم.

- يمكنك أن تستغيثي.

ابتسمت في جفاء وهمست في مرارة: لماذا فعلت بي هذا؟

- أتصدقيني لو قلت إنني أحبك؟

-لا لن أصدقك.

-أتصدقيني لو قلت لك إنني كذبت عليك.. والدي كان غفيرا والغافل كانت أكلتنا المفضلة.. لم أكن ارستقراطيا، لو كنت قابلتك منذ عشر سنوات كنت ستصبحين بالنسبة لي أميرة.

قلت وقد بدأت أفقد السيطرة على عقلي: لن أصدق هذا أيضا.

قام..قبل جبهتي في احترام شديد ثم جلس وهمس: إنك امرأة شجاعة..قلت لي ما اسمك؟

## UNTIL SEVEN O'CLOCK

They say that he wants me for something important. Really a strange man. I barely even know him. I saw him once or twice as I gave private lessons to the son of his house manager. They say that a disaster has come upon him . . . since all his fortunes were acquired through illegal acts. He will end up in prison . . . whether he is a communist or a feudal lord, wealth shows through his stylish suit . . . aristocratic, his father was Minister of Interior in the past, but landowner . . . anyway, it is his voice what I like about him. He never shouts. His voice sounds like the letters of the typewriter, all of them come out equal. See why he wants me? I took out the mirror, stared at my hair parted in the middle . . . I stared at my withered eyes, which started to show the trace of age. "Life deceived you and wrote thirty years off your age" no one tried to flirt with me for a long while. The problem is that I am not like the other girls . . . idiot, I don't know the twisted manners for women. I wonder why this man wants me.

Now five o'clock.

I sat waiting for the man . . . he came in . . . smiled at me chillingly, sat in front of me, then silence prevailed. His eyes were really strange as they were like carefully sharpened pencil head. He whispered to the maid: I want a pistachio dish then dinner.

The man is really crazy . . . Dinner? What? Does he think that I am one of them? So I talked, he did not answer. He looked around in the confusion of a child getting out from his innocent world to a world he does not know nor understand, then he said in sternness: You will not go today.

I swallowed my saliva in astonishment and said: "What?"

"Because if you go today . . . Miss . . . Did you tell me what is your name? Excuse me as I forget quickly, this problem of mine, there are many things occupying me these days, I wanted you to make a deal with you."

Then he continued: "What is your opinion about life?" (And I thought that luck finally smiled at me!)

I opened my mouth and he said quickly: "Have you had falafel dish before? How tasty . . ."

"Mr. . . ."

He cut me off: "I will make you taste the pistachio sauce today . . . Have you tried it before? I adore pistachios so much that's why you always find me eating it at dinner . . . rice with pistachios, salad with pistachios, sauce with pistachios, meat with pistachios, and pistachios! Did you tell me what is your name?"

I stood up silently to open the door and leave as the man seems crazy, but he held my hand with strange innocence and murmured in a delicate manner that I don't understand: "Please do not go, I need you!"

I swallowed my saliva . . . a shiver came out of me then I smiled at myself . . . he loves me of course.

He turned around once more in confusion, he called the maid and asked: "Has the marriage authorizing officer arrived or not?"

She said in fear: "He came my sir."

I found my limbs trembling and fell to my seat in astonishment . . . Could it be that he loved me for a long time and I just didn't know?

Sitting in front of me in a flare of enthusiasm and waving his hands nervously like a child wanting something, he said: "We are going to get married now . . . Have you tried pistachio juice? It is nice!"

I said instinctively: "I don't agree."

"Why? Don't you love me? Don't tell me that you don't love me . . . I already saw love in your eyes . . . I don't forget anything that I saw . . ."

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. I closed my eyes, from where a bitter drop of tear came out, what a strange dream that is.

He approached me while whispering: "I know everything about you . . . I love everything in you."

I married him and I don't know how I ate the pistachios and I am his wife, then I asked the maid to prepare a falafel dish for us. He stared innocently as I sat next to him and started to put food into his mouth, as if he was a little child. I did not know the power of affection, I was never affectionate even for a day but he is a strange man.

He smiled at me . . . he made me feel strange, that "I" am introducing him to a world he doesn't know . . . that everything he does with me, even the taste of falafel is strange and new.

Then he gently whispered, holding my hands: "I have to tell you

something important . . . we have to wake up tomorrow at seven in the morning!”

I said in astonishment as if he woke me up from a sweet dream: “Why? I mean . . . I forgot . . . I . . . I have to go now . . . my mother . . .”

He cut me off, annoyed: “Don’t go now . . . I need you.”

He got up quietly . . . opened the drawer of his desk and took out two boxes . . . he gave me one, then opened it, and I found an exquisite diamond ring, my hand shivered and I looked at him, and he said quickly: “You know how much it costs? Three hundred thousand Egyptian pounds . . . Unfortunately I won’t be able to buy it for you . . . I borrowed it today . . . and I will return it tomorrow at seven!”

I looked at him in the same astonishment then I said, hesitantly: “I don’t understand.”

“You can wear it until seven . . . What do you think Miss . . . Did you tell me what is your name? I am sorry about this forgetfulness . . . Is it better to wear a beautiful diamond ring like this for only a few hours, or is it better to live all your life not knowing what a diamond is?”

I said quickly: “Of course it is better to wear it for a few hours!”

“Our life is like this my dear, a bundle of scattered hours, we borrow it then we return it, and I decided to return it at seven o’clock and you are with me.”

I smiled quietly: “We give back the ring.”

“We give back our life.”

He opened the second box, in which there is a small bottle, he smiled and whispered: “Poison . . . I will kill myself at seven, for the upcoming few hours for me in this world will be without the ring so I have to finish it. Even the pistachios ran out. There are only few hours left and you are with me.”

I gasped in panic: “With you, where to?”

“I have chosen you.”

“For you to kill me? You are . . . You are tired and desperate, suicide will not help . . . in the morning . . .”

“In the morning I will enjoy the greatest of my victories, with my ability to control a human being. In the morning you will drink the poison with me at your own will, it’s enough of what I have achieved until now.”

A foolish and crazy person . . . In the morning I will call the

police to stop him, and if they wouldn't stop him from doing this, then it would be enough for me to stay alive . . . Maybe I have to leave now, or why don't I wait until the morning?

All what he's doing will not work with me. His words are strange. His innocence is accompanied by the enthusiasm of a young man, the nerves of an old man, and the weakness of a child. All this will not work with me. When I return . . . I will . . . I will start a new life, for my old life was too tedious. Maybe I marry someone else . . . Marriage was my dream and it came true and there will be no one like him . . . I do not have to marry then. Do I love him? Do I call the police now? I will wait for two hours until seven o'clock. I will stay with him until seven o'clock as I might not see him anymore. His words are strange. I am about to lose my mind . . . Is he a devil or what? What brought me here? We'll wait until seven.

I stared in his eyes and he smiled confidently and whispered: "Are you afraid?"

I said in despair: "The time for fear is over because I drank the poison."

"You have less than half an hour."

I said in a state of torpor: "You promised me that I will not be in pain."

"You can ask for help."

I smiled indifferently and whispered bitterly: "Why did you do this to me?"

"Do you believe me if I told you I love you?"

"No I won't trust you."

"Do you believe me if I tell you I lied to you . . . My father was a watch guard and falafel was our favorite dish . . . I was not an aristocrat. If I met you ten years ago you would be a princess for me."

Starting to lose control of my mind, I said: "I won't believe this either."

He got up . . . and kissed my forehead in keen respect, then sat and whispered: "You are a brave woman . . . Did you tell me what is your name?"



*Untitled 2018 | Njabulo Dzonzi*





**Nyambura Mpesha**  
*M-Diag | Nani?, Who?*

*Translated by the author*



## M-DIAG<sup>1</sup>

Uanzaye mwaka mosi sikiliza za DIAG  
Ipo hapo mbele, puani pa Hatcher

Habari hizi sikiliza

Si mzaha, si mchezo

Iko wazi ya buluu, na herufi yake

M

‘Sikanyage ‘sichezee, uko mwaka mosi

‘Kikanyaga ‘taanguka, mitihani utafeli

Utafeli, utashindwa

Miaka yote utashindwa

‘Sikanyage M-DIAG

Ni mwiko!

## M-DIAG

You starting first year, listen about DIAG  
It’s there in front of Hatcher’s nose

Listen to these news

It’s not a joke, it’s not a game

It’s open, in blue, its letter

M

Don’t step on it, don’t play with it, in first year

Step on it, you’ll fail, you’ll fall, exams you’ll fail

You’ll fail, defeated

All years defeated

Don’t step on M-DIAG

It’s taboo!

---

<sup>1</sup>This poem was written in Swahili for my Swahili students. I could not find a better title in Swahili because M-DIAG is presented as a proper noun and I wanted the readers to recognize the place name. Translating the poem into English proved challenging. The verbs –ANGUKA, –FELI, –SHINDWA mean the same thing and in Swahili they are emphatic. The English words FAIL, FALL, and DEFEATED do not seem to convey the same seriousness. The Swahili poem and its English translation have different rhythms. Hatcher Library is personified as having a nose but the image only makes sense in Swahili suggesting the proximity of M-DIAG with reference to Hatcher as similar to the proximity EYE to NOSE on a human body.

## Nani?<sup>2</sup>

Walinizunguka wengi wao  
Bila kunipa shikamoo  
Na mie nikanyamaza  
Nione walilowaza  
Ya mkongwe wa misimu elfu.

Mwanifungiani jamani  
Mwanivuta kwa nini  
Tangu lini akahama  
Mzee wa misimu elfu, kahama  
Mmesikia wapi kahama?

Japo sitembei  
Nyumba ninazo mbili  
Ya sasa ya lazima  
Japo si ya kuazima  
Na ya kwanza nisahau.

---

<sup>2</sup>The poem was first written in Swahili when a tree was removed from the University of Michigan's campus. It was written as a riddle for Intermediate Swahili students. With time the tree has been forgotten and often the students are not able to decipher the riddle. The answer to question WHO is THE BUSINESS SCHOOL TREE. This riddle is used when the class is learning Swahili riddles and conundrums.

## Who?

Many surrounded me  
Without a respectful greeting  
I kept silent  
To see their plan  
Concerning the old one of a thousand seasons.

Why tie me  
Why pull me  
Since when did one move  
An old one of a thousand seasons  
Where did you hear of such a move?

Though I don't walk  
I have two homes  
The current one is forced on me  
Though not a borrowed one  
And the first I forget.



Mukoma Wa Ngugi

*Kidane-Diva* “Come See the  
Other Me,” from *We Sing the  
Tizita to Unbury Our Dead  
with Song*





## “Come See the Other Me!”<sup>1</sup>

By the time I made it back, Kidane was serving Mohamed and the kids hastily scrambled eggs. They had a good laugh at my expense. She went to the kitchen to toast some bread only to hear her curse so loudly that we all went quiet. Mohamed asked what the matter was, and she marched and furiously placed a small loaf of bread with no crust on the table. Then I remembered Mohamed and I high the night before, the munchies demanding something sweet and the only thing we could find was bread. Mohamed had insisted he was going to make me the best peanut butter and jelly sandwich – it involved eating toasted crunchy crust. It was the best P&J sandwich I had ever had but we had not anticipated the fall out. The kids did not mind though, so it balanced out in the end.

It was time to leave for the concert – the set up and rehearsals were going to eat up the rest of the day. The kids were also eager to play football with their father, so after quick casual goodbyes, we were on our way. The same cab driver that dropped us off two days ago was waiting for us at the end of the painful, now that I was invalid with blistered feet, long trek. But I had to make it.

“Shall I stop at the other place?” He asked as soon we got in.

“Yes,” she replied.

“What other place?” I asked her.

“You will see,” she answered and they both laughed.

The cab driver’s name I now learned was Mustafa, a Somali living in Addis and I guess until he had seen you twice, he maintained his cover. Xenophobia against Somali people anytime the war in the Ogaden flared up was a constant fear. We spoke about xenophobia all over the continent, South Africa, Libya, Egypt, it seemed Pan-Africanism was in spirit and not in practice. We talked about Al-Shabab and how the Islamic Court Unions might have done some good were it not for Ethiopia and the United States. And how now Kenya had finally invaded Somalia “officially.”

The conversation moved on to the mundane, the cost of bread,

---

<sup>1</sup>Excerpted from *We Sing the Tizita to Unbury Our Dead with Song*, a forthcoming novel by Mukoma Wa Ngugi to be published by Cassava Republic Press. The novel is written in English.

petrol and so on until we were back in Addis where he drove to an expensive looking building a few hundred yards from the African Union headquarters. I thought we were picking up someone but we drove to the back where he punched a few keys into a pad and large gates opened up to a garage. I asked Kidane again where we were going. She simply smiled. Mustafa parked his taxi next to a long Mercedes Benz that looked all the more new next to his Oldsmobile. We entered an elevator where he once again punched a code and we took the long ride up to the top floor to pick up whom I now was sure was a good friend, or Kidane's lover.

When it turned out he had the key to an immaculately furnished penthouse apartment and there was no one in, I started to suspect that they were lovers. They went to respective rooms. The suspense was killing my tabloid senses so I started looking for clues – there were none. I looked at the magazines and newspapers on the glass coffee table. Before I could open the latest Ebony Magazine with barely dressed hips thrust into the camera, Beyoncé on its cover, Kidane, and shortly thereafter Mustafa, returned.

Only it was not Mustafa and Kidane, it was the Diva and her bodyguard. The Diva came over to where I was standing frozen, mouth open, at once understanding what was before me and at the same time as confused as I had ever been. She was dressed in a long white tight evening gown, a light shawl covered with the Ethiopian flag colors, green, yellow and red wrapped around her bare shoulders, her long muscular neck naked. In white sneakers, she was a picture of a quiet sexiness.

Mustafa was dressed in a tuxedo and where before he had seemed thin and effeminate, even in his several sizes bigger shirts and trousers, the Mustafa that stood before me was a guy you did not want to mess with, his chest straining the shirt buttons as he adjusted a gun in his shoulder holster, put on his jacket and checked himself in the mirror to make sure that the gun was concealed. I recognized him – he was the man I had almost run into back at the ABC when I was leaving the Diva's dressing room.

“What is going on? I saw you at the ABC,” I said to him.

He shrugged and smiled.

“What's going?” I asked the Diva.

She went over to the stack of magazines and newspapers, took one and threw it at me so that it fell by my feet. And that is when I saw *The National Inquisitor* headline: “The Singer on Top: Drugs, Sex and competition in Nairobi” – the piece in which I had lied in order to bulldoze the moneymen at *The National Inquisitor* to send me to Ethiopia. If the Diva had it, then others surely had seen it.

“You are not the only one with secrets,” she said with a laugh when I started trying to explain.

They walked to the door and for a moment I thought they would leave me behind.

“Come,” she commanded and I followed them, less a journalist and more like a boy with a crush caught lying. Mustafa flashed me a sympathetic, even friendly smile.

What had I been thinking? And why was she letting me carry on? Whatever the case, I was going to give my readers a good story, regardless of the truth. I mean, had I written only about the Diva of Nairobi, would that have been the truth? Or if I wrote only about Kidane, wife and dutiful mother – would that have been the truth? In a world of multiple covers and faces, only a fool would think the truth was the first face one saw. In journalism school, we used to have drunken debates in the same parties where I played my one Malaika song about objective reporting. Ever the radicals, we would agree there was nothing like objective reporting.

But we had it all wrong because we placed the burden of objectivity on the journalists who in turn bring their biases to the story, to be piled on by the biases of the editor dictated by whatever corporation owned the paper. But we always assumed the subject of the reportage was objectively solid and stable. Well, what I was learning, or rather seeing, confirmed that both the journalist and the subject were in constant motion. And if both of you stopped and talked over a cup of coffee or a beer, that would be a sliver of the truth at that point in time. We had been applying the uncertainty principle to the wrong party; both the journalist and the subject were in constant motion.

Kidane and the Diva, Mustafa the taxi driver and Mustafa the dangerous looking bodyguard in a tuxedo, my many selves and *The National Inquisitor* reporter. All that was beside the point – the ques-

tion was why Kidane was letting me see her many truths or lies and whether the other musicians would do the same. I was now all the more intrigued to a point of testing my sanity by her.



The Addis Ababa Stadium & Millennium Hall – magnificence on steroids – a country conscious of its image as the poster child of development. In many ways the stadium itself was performing for the TV cameras, the blog writers and tweeters because each story, whether it's about a football game, a political speech or music performance has to begin with its vastness, filled with 60,000 people all here to watch, listen and commune. 60,000 people in one space produce electricity, current charged with anticipation, and in the constant loud indecipherable murmur of talking and singing voices.

She is here to do a benefit concert for soldiers, veterans, families, friends and anyone who cares to show up. It is free, so it's 60,000 people and probably another five thousand standing outside the stadium, not to mention those watching from home. Backstage, the Diva standing there surrounded by tech people, journalists, fans who had won backstage passes, the Diva surrounded by the machinery that produces the music we consume looks so small, in danger of being crushed by all of it. She smiles, signs this, takes a photo, kisses someone on the cheek, shares a joke with an old friend. I look again – she is not in danger of being crushed by it all, she is in control, the skillful surfer who seems to be in danger of being swallowed by a massive wave but triumphs each time. Every now and then she looks at Mustafa, the leash will keep her tied safely to her surfboard if the rising waters were to push her off.

The anticipation builds; the band, all men dressed in army jackets over khaki pants and army boots are playing as if on a loop, repeating the phrase so that each time they return to where the musician should make an entrance, the crowd yells for the Diva. She calls me over and the waters respectfully part to let me through and she whispers, “Come see the other me.” She smiles at Mustafa and he walks me over to a small VIP section and then hurries back. I can hear and feel the ocean of 60,000 people behind me. I am no longer a journalist – I am one of them.

I look around and see large screen monitors set up all around the stadium show her making her way to the front of the stage, Mustafa in front of her. The look on her face, triumph mixed with a self-conscious smile that suggests she knows how good she is play on her face. The Diva – Kidane transfigured into the Diva – walks onto the stage. The united horn section goes into high gear, the drums, bass and keyboards follow and a storm of dancing song brews. She walks up and down the stage, she owns it – she stops every now and then, says something and playfully wags a finger at the crowd – I have no idea what the words mean, but I know enough now not to worry about what words mean but what her voice says – she is telling the men to be careful of her, or of others like her, or telling the women to be wary of men like the ones she is pointing at.

Call and response with the band, the horn section coming in slightly before she talks to the men, more like sings to them with the band all quiet and then as her voice gets angrier yet playful the band comes in. The drums set the tone – a few angry rat-a-tats as the horn section, the keyboards and the Diva remain silent – and then her, just her, her voice speaking to the 60,000 people comes in, magnified by the image of the beautiful lone woman on stage and we all go wild, the band comes in – and we are hungry for more.

She paces up and down stage, her voice whipping up the band into a frenzy – and then she does a simple gesture that almost causes a riot – the band comes to a stop, there is only silence. She runs to the center of the stage and takes off her suit jacket – and then runs her fingers over the buttons of her white shirt, pretending to undo each one of them. The roar of a turned-on crowd – the band intervenes but not before letting one of the trumpet players talk to her – his trumpet approving, asking for more. It is in a word the sexiest, most erotic performance I have ever witnessed and I feel things in me stirring, made all the more intense by a turned-on, massive crowd. And then she moves on to a few more disco-music like tunes – we dance and dance, people sing along to her popular songs until their voices are hoarse. This is not Kidane on stage – this is the Diva and I feel I understand her even though I have no words to express this understanding. The Diva and her all-male band – she thrives,

loves being in control of all of them, all their macho selves held and sewn together by her voice.

Almost two hours into the concert – a song ends – she bows her head, and lifting only her eyes so that it looks like she is about to charge the crowd, she says, “I believe in God.” I expect her to say she believes in the devil as well – but this is a different crowd – soldiers do not need to know the devil, the trenches are hell – they need to believe that they are fighting tyranny for democracy. This group of men yet to be wounded or killed, yet knowing that for some of them death is certain, and those who had survived and lost a limb or faith, and the relatives of those who died, they all need hope. They do not need to be reminded of the devil, they need to be reminded of God, of hope.

The band leaves the stage in silence. Mustafa comes and hands me an envelope. “She wants you to have this,” he says as he sits by me. A choir dressed in blue comes in and standing in front of them is a *krar* player, short, and overweight. I open the envelope – it’s a Tizita, in Amharic and in English. It’s all written down by hand. I realize it was the Diva who has done the translation.

The *krar* starts off with a solo as she sways on the side, now more self-aware. She waits a little bit more and says something that Mustafa translates for me as 60,000 people get on their feet, yell, clap and shush each other. “It’s a Tizita by Bezawork. She wants to pay homage to one of the greatest Tizita singers of all time,” he translates. A few reps by the *krar* player, she closes her eyes and brings the microphone to her mouth, keeps swaying from side to side as if waiting for a cue that only she knows – I remember this from her performance at the ABC. The *krar* player’s fingers at times a blur, at other times picking up one note after the other, keeps nodding in her direction, as if telling her, I am waiting for you, enter now.

60,000 people still on their feet waiting, and the waiting itself feels like a song. The choir sways with her waiting. The band members taking a break have also come out to the sides of the stage, a little worry and pride etched on their faces. And then whatever she was waiting for, perhaps a perfect balance between the *krar* and the loud anticipation from the crowd comes to pass. Her voice, hoarse from all the high charged singing earlier is cracked a bit but it adds

to the music. I finally allow myself to look at the lyrics – they are in Amharic but I follow them listening to her voice not for words and their meaning, but as an instrument trying to tell us something. What does it matter what the words mean? I listen.

Hiiwot zora zora, TeQuma tizitan

Hiiwot zora zora, TeQuma tizitan

Dirron ayto madneQ, yesekenu eletta

Dirron ayto madneQ, yesekenu eletta

Deggun mastawesha, baynorewu tizita

Deggun mastawesha, baynorewu tizita

Negen baltemegnat, sewu . . . . .

Negen baltemegnat, sewu . . . . .

The cadence of her voice relaxed, the voice I know to be hers – it's almost like she is having a chat with the Tizita – her voice . . . the word I have been looking for comes to me – her androgynous voice rising falling with the bass and the krar, drawing out sorrow as if from a well – and when she repeats Tizita, Tizita, I hear split images of Bedele and her, alive and young and vital, the tragedy of what awaits their happiness in the horizon. Love and its mischief, it came and left, her voice the instrument cries.

Tizita bicha newu, yelib guadegna

Tizita bicha newu, yelib guadegna

Letamemech hiiwot, meTSnagna medagna

Letamemech hiiwot, meTSnagna medagna



The way her voice quivers, life has become unbearable, cannot be lived as is and something has to give . . .

Eyayun malefin, lemedelign aynein

Eyayun malefun, lemedelign aynein

Eyayu malefun, lemedelign aynein

What is she pleading for and whom is she imploring? Here I got lost in my own thoughts. The Diva, I know she can hit any note she wants – she had done it with me, just yesterday with her kids running around the yard, the sun that had just set an hour before glowing through the clouds. But this evening she is holding back, and where her voice takes command and soars, she flicks her hand up in the air as if to hold herself back, and she lets the krar play on eight or so beats before coming back to the song.

That gesture again and I put the lyrics down. I start to watch each time she raises her hand – the gesture elides over something. I watch hard enough to notice that she did that to pull herself back. The Corporal had done it, the holding back, at the ABC but not to the same effect as Kidane. We had been angry at his holding back because we wanted a bit of that flagellation that comes with facing one's demons – catharsis. But Kidane is getting rewarded – the crowd going crazy each time. The choir comes and completes the gesture by giving depth as opposed to height through a solo.

That gesture again! And then it hits me; the crowd was going crazy each time she held back. It was so simple it makes me want to cry. The reason why some preachers are better than others, or some poets better than others – they merely suggest and your fears or wants at their most absolute manifest themselves. I could tell myself she was performing – but performance as I understood it was about show, fireworks – performances were not supposed to be what Kidane was doing, merely suggesting, being content to suggest and let us do her work. I look at the lyrics.

Shimagilei Teffa, shibet ende'dirro

Shimagilei Teffa, shibet ende'dirro

Shimagilei Teffa, shibet ende'dirro

Shimagilei Teffa, shibet ende'dirro

Shimagilei Teffa, shibet ende'dirro

Shimagilei Teffa, shibet ende'dirro

Shimagilei Teffa, shibet ende'dirro

The choir comes in again, this time allowing each voice to be soothing yet almost distinct – I can hear twenty voices, all of them with something to say singing together – this loss, it's ours, it's not to be feared, it's to be embraced. It is in the loss that they find life, they play with their voices. And the Diva is somewhere in their voices; her voice strong and vulnerable, almost lost but at the same time carrying them all. And then they slow down and let the krar take the lead until it too slows down and the song and performance ends. The stage is rushed. I expect Mustafa to jump into action. He shrugs when I look at him.

“She is safest here – no one would dare touch her,” he says to me.

I look again. Her fans are not rushing the stage to take a piece of her, to take a memento home; they are hurling love and kisses at her. Others rush and stand at a respectful distance – they just want to be close to her. So I ask him if he can translate as I ask the people who have overrun our little VIP section some questions, or rather one question – What is the Tizita to you? I pick the people randomly.

A schoolboy still in uniform – *it fills me with pride.*

A soldier – *it makes death feel warmer.* I ask him through Mustafa to explain a little bit more. *Death, we are all going to die – me, maybe in a war. The way she sings it? It makes me know I am part of life – and I will be remembered even after I am gone.*

A couple that wouldn't be able to hide their love for each other even if they tried – *If I was to lose her, I would kill myself* the man says.

*And if he died, I would go on living – I would find the strength to live for the both of us* – she says, laughs, and they try to make their way to the Diva.

An old white woman, high as a kite and dressed like a 1960s hippie – *The Tizita is a mirror that does not like one single thing*. I ask her to explain but she pinches me on my cheek playfully, like Miriam would do, and says, *live long enough son*.

An old man with his son – *my daughter died in the liberation war – I find comfort knowing I will join her soon*.

The son/brother – *The Tizita is the blood in our soil – the Tizita makes it boil*. I ask him to explain and he says he has no words beyond that.

Mustafa slaps me on my back – “And you my friend, what does the Tizita mean to you?”

I am taken aback by the question but also surprised by how readily the answer rolls off my tongue.

“Just how little of life I understand,” I answer.

“And you?” I ask him.

He looks over at the Diva and I am almost afraid of what he will say.

“I would kill or die for her,” he answers.

**Frieda Ekotto**

*L'Art de Regarder: Une Lettre  
de Frieda Ekotto à Frida  
Khalo, The art of looking:  
A letter to Frida Kahlo  
from Frieda Ekotto*

*Translated by* **Emily Goedde**



*Quel Malheur que d'être femme ! Et pourtant le pire malheur,  
quand on est femme, est au fond de ne pas comprendre  
que c'en est un.*

Kierkegaard

## L'ART DE REGARDER

Une lettre de Frieda Ekotto à Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo n'est qu'émotion. Le propos de Kierkegaard ne correspond en rien à cette artiste unique en son genre. Elle s'est concentrée sur elle-même et sur ses sensations. Sans conteste, c'est la femme de mes désirs ! Elle laisse au monde un patrimoine pictural au travers duquel elle assume sa féminité jusqu'à son dernier souffle. Être femme pour Frida Kahlo ne fut pas un malheur, au contraire. Sur chaque photo, elle est habillée chic, elle est sereine, séduisante, prête à croquer et à être croquée. Comme toutes les femmes avec lesquelles je voudrais avoir une relation intime, j'ai honte de l'avouer, j'ai honte de me laisser aller, mais je les admire de loin et de près. Je n'ose pas dire : « Oui, je te désire, je te veux. » Je dis juste : « Oh ! Je veux . . . » Cette phrase est simple ou du moins, elle paraît facile à prononcer. Il y a une vraie pudeur qui m'envahit quand j'ouvre la bouche pour la proférer. Ce sont des choses qu'on ne dit pas, on les garde pour soi. C'est mon jardin secret. J'aurais sûrement tremblé devant elle comme je l'ai été devant ce grand poète des caraïbes Aimé Césaire. L'émotion !

Dans de moments de doute (comme celui-ci que je traverse), j'aurais voulu commencer cette lettre par une date précise inscrite dans le calendrier. Quelque chose comme ce qui suit : « Frida Kahlo et Frieda Ekotto se sont connues en 1986 dans son musée de la Casa Azul à Coyoacán au Mexique. Quelle belle couleur que cette maison bleue où vit encore aujourd'hui une mémoire, une vie, l'œuvre d'une peintre qui brise l'âme par la profondeur de son expression artistique ! Partout des peintures impressionnantes, d'admirables portraits et autoportraits, ses robes colorées, son beau visage, ses yeux qui me parlent, mais aussi des odeurs, la sensation d'une

vie brisée par la désolation. L'effet Frida Kahlo, depuis mon séjour mexicain qui date de mes années d'études se poursuit, s'amplifie, se transforme, rebondit et me poursuit. Elle est partout et nulle part. Elle est un effet de vérité sur l'histoire de mes parents, et de mon pays le Cameroun. Tout le monde semble la connaître, et surtout sa vie de femme à travers une relation complexe, à l'instar de cet autre grand peintre Diego Rivera, sa grenouille adorée.

Or, moi, je la connais de l'intérieur. C'est à travers elle que j'ai commencé à aimer mon nom. Ce prénom si doux glisse entre les lèvres. Or, Frida Kahlo est un nom historique, mais pour moi, c'est d'abord une femme porteuse d'histoire, de politique, de philosophie et une peintre unique voire *une femme exceptionnelle* comme l'annonçait la bande publicitaire du film *Frida* de Julie Taymor (2002). Je voudrais la toucher, glisser ma main sur ses joues, effleurer son nez, laisser mes doigts monter et descendre sur les siennes. J'aime les mains des artistes. Je suis toujours très émue quand je touche les mains d'un de mes amis écrivains. Ses doigts sont fins, longs, attirants. Certes, pour Frida Kahlo, je meurs d'envie de sentir ses nymphes avec le bout de mon index. Frida, je t'aurais aimé comme une femme aime une autre femme. Je t'aime si loin, si près de ta peinture. Tu as vu le jour avant moi, je suis dans la nuit avec toi et demain, je verrai le jour. Demain, tu me regarderas avec le même regard du portrait que j'ai choisi de mettre dans mon bureau. C'est une photo en noir et blanc, tu es belle Frida Kahlo et je t'admire. Un cillement de l'œil sur ta peinture donne de l'intensité à ma poitrine comme si elle arrachait mon cœur. Tes peintures circulent à travers le monde. Chacune d'elles est différente, une émotion particulière, quelque chose de très touchant, ma chère Frida. Quelle émotion, ton art ! Là, tu y déposes ta souffrance, ton humanité.

On les aime, on les admire, on peut même y toucher ou sentir cette douleur qui te terrassait sur ton lit d'hôpital des années durant. On apprécie surtout ta féminité exubérante, tes belles robes assorties aux colliers magnifiques. On entend presque leur timbre, mais la dernière scène où elle se fait transporter dans son lit de malade pour se célébrer dans cette galerie où son mari Diego et les autres admirent son travail, elle débarque avec son lit dans une robe aux couleurs vives, elle est pleine de vie, elle est *Frida* comme dirait

Baudelaire, il s'agit de « la célébration de quelque mystère douloureux. » De la voir s'animer dans son lit, on oublie qu'elle est malade, mourante à la limite. L'enthousiasme de cette femme rappelle que la vie n'est que regard et passion.

Ce qu'elle est, Frida Kahlo l'est tout d'abord en vertu non d'un destin, fatalité cosmique, volonté divine ou nature déterminée, mais d'une histoire. Et dans cette histoire, on ne saurait l'enfermer comme dans une limite contraignante et indépassable. Son être et son œuvre éclatent dans toutes sortes de postures possibles, insaisissables tout autant qu'affirmation de soi. Je suis Frida Kahlo. Soy yo !

Je reviens à nouveau au Mexique. Cette fois avec Frida Kahlo, peintre allemande et mexicaine. J'arrive trop tard, car elle n'y est plus, seule sa peinture continue de m'éblouir. Sublime, cette femme qui a tant souffert dans sa chair. Comment la repenser, comment l'extraire du silence de mon âme ? L'accident de voiture où elle a failli perdre la vie. L'accident de voiture où j'ai aussi failli perdre la vie. À cinq ans, je perds mes camarades d'école dans un accident mortel. Mon père vient récupérer mon cadavre comme d'autres parents. Or moi, je suis dans les décombres à la recherche de mon cartable. J'avais un joli petit cartable cuir marron. Il se trouve à présent dans les objets que ma famille collectionne passionnément, telle une relique. Fort ému, à la soutenance de ma thèse, mon père raconte cette histoire les larmes aux yeux. « Ma fille, Frieda, ma Sulamithe, ma mère est née avec une étoile lumineuse, elle a déjà frisé la mort plusieurs fois. C'est un miracle qu'elle soit là aujourd'hui, qu'elle soutienne sa thèse sur un criminel, Jean Genet, un lumineux comme elle, ça ne me surprend pas du tout. »

Au cœur de cette histoire d'amour platonique s'entrecroisent celle de nos deux pays et celle aussi de nos pères : L'Allemagne et le Cameroun. Inutile de revenir sur ce malheur, il n'empêche : le prénom Frida/Frieda est la marque pour chacune de nous d'une blessure profonde. Ce qui m'intéresse dans l'itinéraire de ces prénoms, c'est leur affrontement à l'Histoire. Frida Kahlo, qui devrait être l'Allemagne même, s'y oppose. Frieda Ekotto accepte l'Allemagne, qui lui donne une assise, du lest. L'histoire coloniale nous tatoue jusque sous la peau. Certes, j'ai aujourd'hui le choix de refuser ce prénom. Je pourrai me faire appeler Sula, c'est court, c'est direct,



c'est doux à prononcer. Su-la contient deux sons comme d'ailleurs Frie-da.

Je suis née au Cameroun d'une mère Congolaise et d'un père Camerounais. Je viens à la rencontre de la grande majesté Kahlo avec mon passé dominé. Les Allemands occupent le Cameroun. Notre histoire commune commence en 1885 autour d'une table en Allemagne avec les dignitaires de tous les pays européens pour le dépeçage de l'Afrique : aucun Africain n'est présent parmi eux. Que dois-je donc penser moi de cette division ? Aujourd'hui la retombée de ce grand conciliabule est ce prénom que je traîne comme un boulet. Car, même au Cameroun, la nouvelle génération ne sait plus que notre pays a été une possession allemande. J'ai appris à aimer ce prénom parce que toi aussi tu le portais. Mais quel poids ! 1885, la Conférence de Berlin : le but est simple, se partager la partie subsaharienne de l'Afrique. Partout l'inscription de la violence, partout l'horreur qui nous meurtrit chacune dans son coin. Un point commun : l'Allemagne de Bismarck. Frida, j'aurais tellement aimé te parler de cette histoire, de notre histoire. J'imagine aisément tes réponses à mes questions. Je sais que tu regarderais le contour de mes lèvres sensuelles. Le collier rouge que je porte aujourd'hui aurait attiré ton regard. Tu l'aurais trouvé joli et tu m'aurais fait un clin d'œil. Ta passion, ton génie, ton désir pour ce Diego qui s'enflammait au quart de tour au contact des corps. Il baisait toutes les femmes qui passaient sous ses yeux, y compris ta propre sœur. Toi, Frida, tu as réagi en femme jalouse, tu as quitté ta grenouille adorée, enfin ! Mais la vie vous avait scellé et cela personne n'y pouvait rien. Il est revenu dans ta vie comme ton deuxième mari. Ce petit gros talentueux, un être impossible, vivant sa vie d'artiste, oubliant que toi aussi tu n'avais qu'une envie de vivre cette vie avec lui. Ton œuvre artistique est aussi importante que la sienne. Ce n'était pas cela la donne. Là, tu as eu quelques relations avec de jolies femmes, Frida ! Je sais, c'est le désir, n'est-ce pas ? Tes caresses sur leurs fesses, tes baisers doux, humides, tièdes, chauds, ta langue sur leurs seins, ton parfum de femme. Oh ! Frida, ton regard, trop profond, je le sens sur moi, discrètement. Je reste figée dans un coin et je t'observe jouer avec elles.

Nous sommes dans l'Histoire. Je parle du passé au présent, du

présent au passé. Tout se mélange, mais tout reste clair aussi. Frida Kahlo, c'est toi la femme que je désire ou disons que j'aurais voulu avoir dans mon lit. Ce n'est pas vulgaire ce que je dis là, en somme, c'est un peu de l'ordre du sacré, cette femme qu'on idéalise de loin, dans l'Histoire . . . Que nous dit l'Histoire ? Pour Frida, une passion violente, une souffrance infinie. Quelle souffrance, mes aïeux. Ce monde de mensonges dans lequel nous vivons. Au moins Frida, tu avais ta peinture, tes pinceaux sont des armes révolutionnaires ou comme dirait le poète Césaire, tes armes miraculeuses !

Frida Kahlo, je me demande encore comment te dire que je suis dans ton ombre, petite, mais pharaonique, car je t'élève dans la profondeur d'un baiser de femme, dans la douceur de ma caresse. Il y a un portrait de toi dans mes bureaux, dans ma chambre, dans mon bureau à la maison. Tu es dans ma vie, tu es importante pour moi, tu me signales ta grandeur, ta dignité, ta passion, ta créativité. Dans le quotidien, dans ma philosophie du moment, du maintenant, je te vois me regardant, me souriant, me donnant ton soutien. Je sais que tu es là sur ce chemin compliqué du quotidien, que tu m'acceptes comme je suis avec toutes mes contradictions. Toi-même, tu avais une montagne de contradictions. Vivre veut dire passer des compromis et comprendre les contradictions qui nous définissent. Je ne saurais me lever sans ton soutien. Quand il m'arrive d'oublier qui je suis, je souffle un peu, je me conte et me raconte, comme me le recommande Marthe, ma compagne.

J'ai décidé de raconter ma relation avec toi. Mais tu sais, Frida Kahlo, tu sais que je me demande souvent qui je suis. J'avance dans l'ombre, doucement, en cherchant une lumière pour m'énoncer, me guider. Hier, j'ai parlé avec mon grand ami Nimrod sur qui je suis. Il me parle de la limite de la paranoïa. J'ai un peu peur, peur de me savoir peut-être malade. J'ai peur . . . je sais que Rimbaud l'a dit : « Je est un autre. » Est-ce mon cas ? J'aime parler avec cet ami, c'est doux, c'est tendre, c'est passionnant. La question de la vérité reste une idée majeure dans la vie. Le dire vrai, être vrai, ne pas se mentir. Se laisser vivre dans ce monde qui m'échappe, mais auquel je dois faire face. Toi, Frida, je sais combien tu as souffert, combien tu te battais pour dépasser cette souffrance physique de par ton accident, mais aussi cette souffrance psychologique, tu voulais être

mère. Je sais que toi, dans ta maison, tu avais des enfants, beaucoup d'enfants qui venaient se nourrir chez toi, qui venaient te donner ce sourire que tu recherchais chez un enfant. Comme moi, tu as eu des enfants, ceux des autres. Moi, je ne suis pas mère non plus. J'ai juste élevé quatre enfants laissés par ma feuée sœur Mirabelle. Je suis quand même mère par procuration, mais pas comme tu le voulais toi . . . Mais je sais que tu as donné beaucoup d'amour aux enfants, à tes enfants, aux enfants qui venaient manger chez maman Frida. Tu les attendais tous les jours. Ils arrivaient bruyants, pleins d'un bonheur qui te comblait.

Dans mon imaginaire, tu es une grande femme, un amour, une passion ; l'inspiration, je la puise en toi et ton œuvre. Enfin, Hector Biancioti me donne les outils pour faire tomber le « e » de mon prénom. C'est dans son fauteuil que va s'asseoir Dany Laferrière, cet écrivain haïtien avec lequel j'ai eu le plaisir de travailler pendant mes premières années d'enseignement. J'aimais ces cours où il tenait des conversations complètement décousues avec les étudiants. Biancioti disait que ce qui l'a décidé à abandonner l'espagnol pour le français, c'est le *e muet* français. En italien tout comme en espagnol, la voyelle muette n'existe pas. Le jour où Biancioti a savouré la lune au lieu de *luna*, cela fut pour lui une grande découverte. Or que découvrit-il ? Le silence. Et que découvrir avec Frida Kahlo ? La fureur qui fait voler en éclat le « e » muet ! Plus précisément, son inutile inscription. Mais est-elle si inutile que ça ? Rien n'est moins sûr ! Le *i* de Frida est long, il sert à prolonger la voyelle de ce joli nom ! Tout comme le *h* de Kahlo. Chaque langue a son génie propre pour faire sonner les mots. La génétique textuelle n'est jamais transcordable telle quelle d'une langue à l'autre. Mais tu n'es pas femme à procéder avec prudence. Pourtant, tu n'es pas imprudente. Frida est désormais un prénom hispanique, telle est ton éclatante victoire, à l'égale de ta planétaire renommée !

Je t'adore, calorifique Frida Kahlo ! Ta Frieda Ekotto !

*What a misfortune to be a woman! And yet, for a woman the worst misfortune is to fundamentally not understand that she is one.*

Kierkegaard

## THE ART OF LOOKING

A letter by Frieda Ekotto to Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo is sheer emotion. Kierkegaard's comment has nothing to do with her, this artist, unlike any other. She concerned herself with her being and her feelings. There's no question: I desire her. She left behind a pictorial legacy in which she grappled with her femininity until her dying breath. For Frida Kahlo, to be a woman wasn't a misfortune, quite the opposite. In every photo, she is dressed stylishly; she is serene, seductive, ready to devour and be devoured. As with every woman with whom I'd like to be intimate, I'm ashamed to admit it, ashamed to say too much, but I admire them both close up and from afar. I don't dare say, "I desire you. I want you." So I simply say, "Oh, I want . . ." It's a simple phrase, easy enough to say. There is this pudeur when I open my mouth, when I say it. These things are not said. We keep them to ourselves. This is my secret garden. I would have surely trembled before her like I did before the great Caribbean poet Aimé Césaire. Passion!

In moments of doubt (like the one I'm having right now), I would have liked to start with an exact date. Something like: "Frida Kahlo and Frieda Ekotto met in 1986 at the Casa Azúl in Coyoacán, Mexico." What a beautiful color, the blue of this house, which today still holds a remembrance, a life, a painter's work that crushes the soul with the depth of its artistic expression. Breathtaking paintings are everywhere, exemplary portraits and self-portraits, her colored dresses, her beautiful face, her eyes that speak to me, but also the smells, the feeling of a life crushed by desolation. Since this stay in Mexico during my college years, the Frida Kahlo effect has continued to grow, to transform, to twist and turn and haunt me. She is everywhere and nowhere. She is an element of truth among the story

of my family and my country, Cameroon. Everyone seems to know her, especially her experience as a woman involved in a complicated relationship with that other great painter, Diego Rivera, her beloved frog.

As for me, I know her from the inside. It's through her that I began to love my name. My given name, which slides so sweetly between the lips. It's true that Frida Kahlo is a historic name, although for me, she is first and foremost a female bearer of the historical, the political, the philosophical, and a singular painter, in other words an *exceptional woman*, as the teaser for Julie Taymor's film *Frida* (2002) puts it. I would like to touch her, to run my hand across her cheek, to brush her nose, to let my fingers climb up and down hers. I love artists' hands. Something in me is moved when I touch my writer friends' hands. Their long, fine, beautiful fingers. I'll admit it. I'm dying to touch Frida Kahlo's labia with the tip of my index. Frida, I would have loved to love you like a woman loves another woman. I love you so close, so far from your painting. You saw the light of day before me, and I am in the night with you and tomorrow I will see the day. Tomorrow you will look at me with that look you have in the portrait I chose for my office. It's a black-and-white photograph. You are the beautiful Frida Kahlo and I am your admirer. A glance at your painting makes me feel as if my heart were being torn from my chest. Your paintings travel the world. Each is different, with its particular emotion, infinitely touching, my dear Frida. What passion, your art, there where you placed your suffering, your humanity.

They are loved, admired. The pain that left you prostrate on your hospital bed for years at a time can even be touched or felt. We admire your exuberant femininity, your many beautiful dresses and magnificent necklaces. We can almost hear them tinkling, as in that the last scene, when she has herself carried in on her sick bed to be celebrated in the gallery. As her husband Diego and the others express their admiration, she appears upon her bed in a brightly colored dress, full of life. She is *Frida* as Baudelaire would have put it, "the celebration of some painful mystery." Lying on her bed, her face aglow, we forget she is ill, practically dying. Her enthusiasm reminds us that life is nothing but passion and vision.

Whatever she is, Frida Kahlo is first and foremost a result not

of destiny, cosmic bad luck, divine will or natural causes, but of a history, a story. And in this history, story, it is impossible to hold her fast within restrictive, impassable limits. Her being and her oeuvre explode into all kinds of possible points of view, which are elusive even as they are affirmations of self. I am Frida Kahlo. Soy yo!

I return again to Mexico. This time with Frida Kahlo, German and Mexican painter. I arrive too late, for she is no longer there, only her paintings, which continue to dazzle me, remain. Sublime, this woman who suffered so in her flesh. How to think of her anew, how to extract her from the silence of my soul? The car accident in which she almost died. The car accident in which I too almost died. Five years old, I lose my classmates in a fatal accident. My father comes with the other parents to claim the bodies. But I am in the wreckage looking for my schoolbag. I had a pretty brown leather satchel. We have it still, a relic among the other objects my family so passionately collects. My father was so moved at my dissertation defense, that he told this story with tears in his eyes. “My daughter Frieda, my Sulamithe, my mother was born beneath a bright star. She has been close to death more than once. It’s a miracle that she is here today. It does not surprise me at all that she is defending her dissertation on the criminal Jean Genet, a bright star like herself.”

Intertwined at the heart of this platonic love story are those of our countries and our fathers: Germany and Cameroon. It’s pointless to revisit this misfortune. There’s no reason to—the name Frida/Frieda marks the depths of our wounds. What interests me is our name’s trajectories, their confrontations with History. Frida Kahlo, who should be Germany itself, is opposed to it. Frieda Ekotto accepts Germany, which gave her a foundation, a ballast. Colonial history tattoos us beneath our very skin. Indeed, I could now reject this name. I have the choice. I could call myself Sula, it’s short, it’s direct, it’s easy to say. It even has two syllables like Frie-da.

I was born in Cameroon to a Congolese mother and a Cameroonian father. I come to my encounter with Kahlo, Her Grand Majesty, with my dominated past. The Germans occupied Cameroon. Our common history starts in 1885 around a table in Germany with dignitaries from each European country present and ready to carve up Africa. There was not a single African. So what should I think of

this division? Today the consequences of this great secret meeting is this name I drag around like a millstone. For, even in Cameroon, the new generation no longer knows our country was a German possession. I learned to love this name because you, too, carried it. But what weight! 1885, the Berlin Conference. The goal is simple: to divvy up sub-Saharan Africa. Everywhere the inscription of violence; everywhere the horror that wounds each where she is. A common point: Bismarck's Germany. Frida, I would so much have liked to talk with you about this history, our history. I can easily imagine how you would respond to my questions. I know you would study the contours of my sensual lips. That the red necklace I'm wearing today would attract your attention. You would have liked it and you would have winked at me. Your passion, your genius, your desire for Diego who set your body on fire the moment your bodies touched. He kissed all the women who passed beneath his eyes, including your very own sister. You, Frida, you reacted as a jealous woman, you left your beloved frog, finally! But life had fastened you together, and there was nothing anyone could do. He returned to your life like a second husband. That fat, talented, little man, an impossible being, living his life of an artist, forgetting that you, too, had only one desire: to live that life with him. Your artistic oeuvre is as important as his. But that was not the deal. So you found some pretty women, Frida! I know. It's desire, non? Your caresses on their buttocks, your soft kisses, wet, warm, hot, your tongue on theirs, your female perfume. Oh! Frida, your look, too deep. I feel it upon me, discreetly. I sit frozen in a corner and watch you enjoy yourself.

We are within History. I speak of the past in the present, of the present in the past. Everything mixes together but still remains clear. Frida Kahlo, I desire you, or let's just say I would like to have you in my bed. I'm not being vulgar, this belongs to the realm of the sacred, this woman idealized from afar, in History . . . what we call History? For Frida, a violent passion, infinite suffering. What suffering, my ancestors. This world of lies in which we live. At least, Frida, you had your painting, your brushes, your revolutionary weapons, or as the poet Césaire said, your miraculous weapons!

Frida Kahlo, I ask myself still how to tell you that I am in your small but pharaonic shadow, for I raise you in the depth of a wom-

an's kiss, in the softness of my caresses. There is a picture of you in my office, in my room, in my office at home. You are in my life, you are important to me. You remind me of your grandeur, your dignity, your passion, your creativity. In the everyday, in my philosophy of the moment, of the now, I see you look at me, smile at me, supporting me. I know that you are there on the complicated path of the everyday, that you accept me as I am with all my contradictions. You, too, were a mountain of contradictions. To want to live means to compromise and to understand the contradictions that define us. I wouldn't know how to get out of bed without your support. When I forget who I am, I breathe a little, and I speak to myself again and again, as Marthe, my partner, recommends I do.

I decided to speak about my relationship with you. But you know, Frida Kahlo, you know that I ask myself often who I am. I move forward in the shadows, slowly, looking for a light to clarify me, to guide me. Yesterday, I spoke with my good friend Nimrod about who I am. He spoke to me about the limits of paranoia. I'm a little frightened, afraid others might think I'm sick. I'm afraid. . . . I know Rimbaud said it, "I is an other." Is this true for me? I love talking with Nimrod. He is gentle, tender, passionate. The question of truth remains an important idea in life. To speak the truth, to be true, not to lie to oneself. To let oneself live in this world which eludes me but which I must face. You, Frida, I know how much you suffered, how much you fought to overcome the physical suffering from your accident, but also psychological suffering, you wanted to be a mother. I know that you, in your house, you had children, many children who came for nourishment, who came to give you the smiles you sought in children, other people's children. Me, I am not a mother either. I only raised my late sister Mirabelle's four children, so I am mother by proxy, not as you wanted to be. . . . But I know that you gave so much love to your children, to the children who came to eat at Mamá Frida's house. You waited for them every day. They were rowdy and filled with a joy that delighted you.

In my imagination you are a great woman, a love, a passion; inspiration, I draw from you and your oeuvre. In the end, Hector Bianciotti gives me the tools to drop the "e" from my name, from in his Académie seat, which the Haitian writer Dany Laferrière will



come to fill, and with whom I had the pleasure of working during my first years of teaching. I loved his courses consisting of completely disjointed conversations with students. Bianciotti said that the reason he decided to give up Spanish for French was the French *silent e*. In Italian, like in Spanish, there are no silent vowels. For Bianciotti the day he learned to savor *la lune* in the place of *la luna* was one of great discovery. What did he discover? Silence. And what to discover with Frida Kahlo? The fury that explodes in that silent “e”! More precisely, the uselessness of writing it. But is it so useless? Not necessarily! The *i* in Frida is long—it’s there to prolong the vowel in this lovely name! Just like the *h* in Kahlo. Each language has its genius for making words sing. Textual genetics is never transcodable from one language to another. But you’re not a woman to do things prudently. Although you’re not imprudent, either. Frida is henceforth a Latina name, as is your brilliant victory, your planetary fame!

I adore you, my arousing, enkindling Frida Kahlo,  
Your Frieda Ekotto

### Translator’s note

“Frida Kahlo n’est qu’émotion.” This first sentence is, naturally, one of the hardest in the piece to translate. The ones that seem simple often are. It isn’t a question of grammar. It translates fairly directly into “Frida Kahlo is naught but,” if you want to be archaic about it. Or “Frida Kahlo is only,” if you want to put a more positive spin on the exclusionary aspect of “n’est que.” The difficulty lies elsewhere, in the subtle differences between the cognates *émotion* and *emotion*.

The formidable French dictionary *Larousse* defines *émotion* as: “Trouble subit, agitation passagère causés par un sentiment vif de peur, de surprise, de joie, etc.,” which we could render as “sudden disturbance, temporary state of agitation caused by a strong feeling of fear, surprise, joy, etc.” (here, too, we have a tricky cognate in “trouble”). *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, however, establishes *emotion* as “a natural instinctive state of mind deriving from one’s circumstances, mood, or relationships with others.” These two

definitions allow us to begin to sense some differences. The French emphasizes the passing affect of strong feelings, while the English is focused on a state of mind or mood. In this way, *émotion* reads more as an active reaction rather than a state of being influenced by circumstance. For our sentence, this means that Frida is not so much “naught but a state of mind,” but rather the “pure, active harnessing of intense feeling or sensation.”

These subtle differences are what we learn from the translation process. They’re the reason translation notes like these are (in my opinion) so fascinating. They are opportunities to observe what can be gained and learned as we move between languages, considering a vast Venn diagram of interlingual synonyms and metonyms. This expansive space translation creates is not often apparent in the final translated product, however, and is often further obfuscated by criticism that focuses upon lack or poor choices, rather than considering each translation’s particular arc of meaning.

For me, it isn’t translation that’s lacking, but the discourse to acknowledge what is generated in the process. Because in the end, we have to make a choice. Among the many possible words and phrases, which glow before me in their Venn diagram glory, how am I going to translate “Frida Kahlo n’est qu’émotion”?

“Frida Kahlo is sheer emotion.” This way keeps the strong syntactic and rhythmic simplicity of Ekotto’s sentence, but uses “sheer” to emphasize *émotion*’s intensity and force. (When *émotion* appears elsewhere in the essay, I’ve chosen to translate it as “passion.”) What do you think? What does the space between languages, created in the process of translation, evoke for you?

– Emily Goedde



**Susan Kiguli**

*Omuti, The Tree |*  
*Nnakazzadde, Mother |*  
*Wayirindi, The Plague |*  
*The Unending Game,*  
*Omuzannyo Ogutakoma*

*Translated by* **Merit Kabugo**



## OMUTI<sup>1</sup>

Ahaha sooka olabe omuti bwe  
gwettika

Obukoola lukunkumuli  
N'enkuyanja y'ennyembe

N'obunyonyi obw'omu bire  
Kw'ossa okwo n'ebisu byabwo  
Labayo bwe gwettika  
Waggulu ne gwettika  
Ne wansi ne gwebagajja emirandira  
gyagwo  
Wamma omuti ggwo gwayitawo.

Wabula waliyo abababuukirira

Mbu tippa eza loole  
Mbu nazo zettika nnyo  
Kafankunaali w'abantu  
Babuwe ne zikubako enfaafa  
y'ebintu  
Wabbuto n'abwegera  
Naye leka leka wamma  
Kuba yo tippa oluusi  
Egenda mu kkubo eyiwaayiwako

Ate nno ka nkubbireko  
Olumu bagiziyizaako

Nti leero eneesomba wali ow'a  
Katale ak'e Nsambya

## THE TREE

*Ooh! Behold, what a tree can  
carry!*

*Millions of leaves  
Multitudes of succulent  
mangoes*

*As well as little birds of the sky  
And their nests, too  
Behold, what a tree can carry  
On its head, it carries  
On its feet, it heaves and  
carries its roots  
Indeed the tree surpasses all.*

*But there are those who are  
vulnerable*

*Who argue that lorry trucks  
Are also such big carriers  
Of tonnes of all kinds of goods  
They brim over with countless  
goods*

*And the stomachs bulge  
But wait a minute  
The truck, on occasions  
spills some of the baggage  
along the way*

*Let me tell you a little secret  
Sometimes the truck's workload  
is regulated*

*Deciding that today the truck  
Will only carry goods at  
Nsambya market*

<sup>1</sup>The original versions of the poems "Omuti | The Tree," "Nnakazzadde | Mother," "Way-irindi | The Plague" were written in Luganda.

Aaah kati tulabe wamma  
Waliyo amayinja gali ku kasozi  
Namungoona.

*Come on, let us plan properly  
There are those slates  
At Namungoona hill.*

Naye era eyawa omuti ebbeetu

*But the one who gave liberty to  
the tree*

Bannange yasukkuluma  
Akeera maliiri n'alagira

*Transcends all  
He wakes up early to give  
instructions*

Nti obukoola bwa leero  
Bulina kuba butono ate nga

*Ordering that this time  
The leaves must be small in  
size*

Bwasongolerera  
Ate oba okyali awo  
Okutunula ennyo nga bwa  
bigondogondo.  
Kw'ossa buli baaba obulinga

*And pointed in shape  
While you are still mesmerized  
A second look reveals that they  
are variegated.  
And ooh! There are those that  
look like*

Obulina ebisukko ne kakugwaako

*They have lesions and if they  
fall on your skin*

Anti ggwe ne weyagula  
Wabula kyokka kkiriza  
Omuti ggwo gwayitawo  
Era alosa omuti kyokka

*you desperately scratch yourself  
You really need to acknowledge  
That the tree surpasses all  
And whoever gives life to the  
tree*

Ye yasukkuluma n'akamala.

*Is indeed an invincible force.*

## NNAKAZZADDE

## MOTHER

Leero ebigambo ntambudde na bisengejje	<i>Today I have moved with filtered words</i>
Mbisengeka mbisengejja saagala kuwammanta	<i>I pattern and sieve them because I do not want to grope for words</i>
Kale nze nteesa buteesa nti nnakazadde awaanwako	<i>I come with a simple proposal that a mother deserves praise</i>
Kisaana okusaasaanya omuwendo gwa maama	<i>The value of a mother needs to be broadcast</i>
Teriiyo aliguvuganya.	<i>The value of a mother is indisputable.</i>
Kyokka kyo kya mazima ye maama ayatiikirira	<i>It is indeed true that a mother is an icon</i>
Era singa nsobola bannyabo nandibatadde wamu	<i>If it were possible, I would bring all mothers together</i>
Olwo ne nsooka nsaba Nnamugereka angerekere ku mmunyeenye ze.	<i>I would then pray to the Almighty to bequeath some of His stars to me.</i>
Kuba ddala nandiddidde eddaala ne nninya ne nnona	<i>I would then get a ladder and climb up the sky</i>
Ku ziri ezimyansa mwattu buli omu ne muwaako emu	<i>To pick some of the twinklers and hand one to each mother</i>
Ate oba nandisabye Omutonzi n'anjazika ku langi eza musoke	<i>Or I would ask the creator to lend me some of the colors of the rainbow</i>
Bambi buli omu ne muwaako emu.	<i>Then I would give a color to each of the mothers.</i>



Kuba bambi omukwano gwa  
maama simanyi ani  
aligwogerako.

*Because I am not sure whether  
anyone can ever fully express a  
mother's love.*

## WAYIRINDI

Wayirindi, otwrigombeddeko  
nno!

Ani yakuwa olukusa okwekkusa  
otyoy?

Oddidde ebyali ebitiibwa  
obitimbye okwo

Ku bisenge ebimogofu

Olwo osiita ng'asiika ebinyeebwa  
ebisiriira

Nti bwe binaggya tunaggyako  
ebikuta!

Otukongoodde ate n'otubaaga  
Olinga kamunye alengedde  
enkoko enjeru?

Wayirindi otwrigombeddeko  
nnyo!

Essungu oliggye wa eryo?

N'obwebweena n'obwerippye  
mu lubuto?

Ne weddiza obukoko

N'obatika obubuzi

Ne mu ggana n'oweekamu  
ennume?

N'obusolo ku ttale

Okudaala n'okirako abazadde  
ku mbaga

Nti atalina aweeke ejjinja

## THE PLAGUE

*Plague, you have indeed trampled  
on us!*

*Who permitted you to be such a  
glutton?*

*What was once respectable*

*You now hang up on gaping walls*

*You are as mischievous as one  
scorching peanuts while  
roasting them*

*Anticipating to skin the nuts after  
the roast!*

*You have bullied and skinned us*

*You are like an eagle that has  
spotted a white chicken?*

*Plague, you have indeed trampled  
on us!*

*Why all that rage?*

*You even devour little ones  
clinging to the womb!*

*You snatch the chickens*

*You stuff your cheeks with the  
goats*

*In a herd, you pick the bull?*

*Including game in the jungle*

*You brag like parents at a child's  
wedding*

*Who urge the childless to babysit  
a stone*

Wayirindi otwerigombeddeko  
nnyo!

*Plague, you have indeed trampled  
on us!*

Obadde otya atalina nsonyi?  
Ku buko otwala nsonzi

*Why are you so shameless?  
You carry little tiny fish to your  
inlaws*

Nti yii ekyennyanja kyayinga  
obuwoomi!

*Claiming that fish is such a  
delicacy!*

Otulanga ki atubunya obufo?

*What do we owe you that you  
harass us so?*

Ebiwoobe bifuuse eby'olulango  
Olwo okubye akakule akatalaba  
mujja

*Weeping is such a common sight  
With your cynical laughter, as  
loud as that of a co-wife*

Nti he n'oyo anaafumba!

*Who belittles a new co-wife!*

Wayirindi otwerigombeddeko  
luno!

*Plague, you have indeed trampled  
on us!*

Naye naffe tunaakukwata bulago  
Tunaasooba nga nnawolovu  
alabye enswera  
Tunaabanga Nakibinge nti  
n'emmulu zinaalwana  
Anti baalugera nti okwerinda.

*But we shall take you by the neck  
We shall sneak on you like a  
chameleon catching a fly  
Like Prince Nakibinge of old, we  
shall use even reeds to fight  
Like the adage goes, be on your  
guard.*

## THE UNENDING GAME<sup>2</sup>

## OMUZANNYO OGUTAKOMA

We are at it again.  
No one deserves to lose  
A son, a father, a brother, a  
nephew, an uncle  
A daughter, a mother, a sister, a  
niece, an aunt  
No one.

*Tuguzzeemu nate.  
Tewali asaana kufiirwa  
Mutabani, kitaawe, mugandawe,  
kizibwe, oba kojja  
Muwalawe, nnyina, mwannyina,  
nnyazaala we, oba ssenga  
Tewali n'omu.*

No one deserves news  
That a rock full of hatred hit her  
husband  
That he writhed in blood  
As television cameras rolled  
No one merits public humiliation  
With legs thrashing about  
And foam at his mouth  
While television cameras roll.  
No one.

*Tewali asaana kuwulira  
Nti ejjinja ericuuma obukyayi  
lyakubye bba  
Nti bba yalaajanidde mu kitaba  
ky'omusaayi  
Ng'abentambi za ttivvi beetala  
okumulaga  
Tewali asaana kuweebuulwa atyo  
Ng'amagulu ge gagudde  
nnagalaale  
Ng'abimbye n'ejjovu mu kamwa  
Ng'eno ab'entambi za ttivvi  
beetala okumulaga.  
Tewali n'omu.*

No one deserves to receive news  
of  
The death of a father  
By watching uniformed men  
Club his head  
Until he crumbles in an

*Tewali asaana kubikirwa  
Nti kitawo yafudde  
Ng'alaba abenaanise  
ebibomboola  
Bakuba omwagalwa we entolima  
ku mutwe  
Okutuusa lw'aganjalama*

<sup>2</sup>This poem is originally written in English.

Incoherent heap While television cameras run.	<i>N'afuuka omutulumbi Ng'eno ab'entambi za ttivvi beetala. Tewali n'omu.</i>
No one.	
No one deserves to see Bullets lodged In the womb of their Pregnant daughter Her clothes shredded By the power of violence and silence of terror.	<i>Tewali asaana kutunuulira Amasasi nga gasindirirwa Mu lubuto lwa muwala waabwe Eyetisse enda/ettu Engoye ze nga zisensulwa Mu bikolwa eby'obukambwe n'ettima.</i>
No one deserves knowledge of Never knowing why such anger	<i>Tewali asaana kumanya Lwaki tamanyi lwaki obukambwe nga bunu</i>
Moves in loaded guns	<i>Butambulira mu mmundu ezijjudde amasasi</i>
No one.	<i>Tewali n'omu.</i>
No one deserves to travel long distances To fetch the body of a child	<i>Tewali asaana kuseyegera ηηendo Okuwondera omulambo gw'omwana</i>
Sent to university in hope of glory Because a bullet was lodged in	<i>Eyagenda ku yunivasiite afuuke ekula Kubanga yakubiddwa essasi ku mutwe</i>
His head by a security guard Who has lost the sense of foolish daring youth	<i>Nga liva ku mukuumi eyabadde Tamanyi kalaaca ka bavubuka</i>
No one deserves this deliberate extravaganza	<i>Tewali asaanira ffujjo lino lya lugenderezo</i>

Of robbing life	<i>Effujjo ery'okutirimbula abantu</i>
Knowing it will be news for a day	<i>Ng'oli akimanyi nti gajja kuba mawulire ga kiseera buseera</i>
Then another folly will take over	<i>Olwo ate wajjewe kazoole omulala</i>
As families struggle with sorrow	<i>Ng'abantu balumwa obugigi olw'ennaku</i>
With furious young people	<i>Ng'abaana bakula n'obusungu obuzibu</i>
Growing up	<i>Nga bambi bajjudde ekiruyi</i>
To wreck their own nation	<i>Eky'okutaagula eggwanga lyabwe</i>
Which they disown everyday	<i>Eggwanga lye begaana buli lukya</i>
While they live in it	<i>So ng'ate babeera mu lyo</i>
Which they desire to flee	<i>Naye nga baagala okulyabulira</i>
Recognizing they cannot leave	<i>Bwe bakizuula nti tebasobola kuliviira</i>
Realising they are knotted up	<i>Ne bamanya nti balippiddwa muli</i>
in balls of rage and love	<i>Mu bituttwa by'obusungu n'omukwano</i>
Unable to disentangle.	<i>Mwe batakyasobola kwetakkuluza.</i>



**Afua Ansong**



*“The Earth Is Heavy/  
Holds Weight” “Drum”  
“Ananse’s Web”*

*Translated by the author*

---

<sup>1</sup>The following poems are from Afua Ansong’s Adinkra symbols in translation series



*[Nsa'a- money collected from family members and  
friends to help cover the cost of burying one's dead.  
Asaawa-Cotton balls inserted into the nostrils of the dead  
to absorb fluids.*

*Note: In North America and Barbados, African women who were  
enslaved from West Africa were the largest harvesters of cotton.]*



Mother, what have we done with earth's flower?  
forcing it into holes of the dead  
and wrapping it around cold limbs  
not to warm but to exchange for coins and grief.  
We laugh with the white man who drags  
our hands into the deep soils until we are hoes  
turning the calm of earth.

This cotton pulls children out of our bellies  
to chains their nakedness.  
This cotton is the labor of our fingers  
we hide under our beds and uncover again  
to weave a dress, to cover the holes in our skin.  
This cotton drives away our angels  
and brings near spirits with rusted keys  
to ring in our ears:

That if we wanted to be free we could stop picking,  
that if we wanted to run, we could bury ourselves,

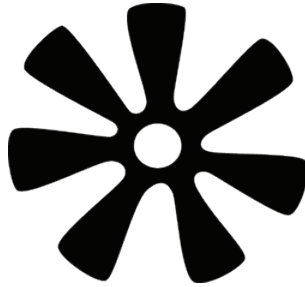
lie in the field of flowers, our burial white and soft  
until water pours out our holes.

Mother, do not fear, the earth itself will drink our blood.



At the artifacts show,  
outdoors, you see a drum  
and touch its face,  
hit it right in the middle  
where the leather tears.  
The red tag says \$35  
but the man selling it sees  
that you are drawn to it  
and that you want to beat it,  
carry it home with you in your red van  
for times when you are  
in a room and the trees  
are dancing without a melody  
or when you are on your bed  
and see how the birds  
dip their necks back to swallow  
light. You take your hands off when he says  
\$20, *You want to get it off my hands?*  
You don't look at his hands to see whether  
he is responsible for the decay,  
whether he understands that drumming  
anything creates bruises  
like drumming the stomach of a woman  
who is forced out of her country  
or drumming a little boy who carries healing  
in his arms. You raise the drum,  
It wears small rings around its waist  
Where could it be from?  
He sees that you draw nearer to it,

that you imagine things you would  
do with this drum, under your armpit  
or between your legs.  
Whose feet have you dragged  
to the dance floor? Whose soft rage have you drowned?  
You beat it one more time and hear it sound  
echo a song you must have sang for your people.



Some frafra woman with scars  
on her cheeks and a blind baby  
on her back bends to pound  
clay into fine particles of pot

Does she know this is art?  
Does she know she is like god?

A cloth hugs her naked breasts  
All the way to her feet.  
She has not touched her braids in weeks.  
Her ritual with clay uninterrupted:  
her fingers yielding mud to a curve  
Or licking sweat off her man's back.

**Mary Pena**

*Rescripting Visual Codes:  
A Poetic Translation*



## Rescripting Visual Codes: A Poetic Translation

### i. *looking*

An elderly figure stands dignified on a roadside, emerging from a backdrop of cane fields.

Her long skirt lingers in a gentle sweep. The fabric curves along her lead leg, bent forward, as her torso turns slightly toward the one framing this picture postcard. She dares to confront the gaze of an unseen photographer, a scornful look that emanates from the dark shadows cast on her face. These defining shapes contour a furrowed brow, high cheekbones, and pursed lips. Yet, her beautiful face, graced with age, holds a look that cannot be contained by shadow, or frame, or colonial optic, or photographic convention.

The vibrant constellation of brow, cheekbones, and faintly illuminated lips refuse the terms of spectatorship and surveillance. It is an unmistakable expression that eludes the enclosure of touristic capture, at the hands of an exalted French descendant, who promulgated the northern landscape of Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic, in the 1900s. His name, appearing across public records and genealogical accounts, has become fodder for folk historians and deltiologists. The beautiful silhouetted figure remains unnamed and tenuously linked to the plots of colonial promotion and technological innovation.

Looking at the image, in digitized form, her shadowed expression absorbs my attention, never mind the undulating dirt path that spills out to the bottom edge like a limelight, much less the gallant horseback rider emplaced at the center of the frame. She is conscripted to the periphery, on the side of the road, a supporting actor in a visual composition that foregrounds a cavalry of workers, who ride towards the city on horses and mules piled with harvested cane. She stands at the borderline, a boundary that demarcates the path on which light refracts, a liminal zone between motion and stasis, the road and arable land. She is denied access to both geographies, historically romanticized in mutually constituting relation.

The caption further disavows her presence.

*Campesinos entrando a la Población* ("Farmers entering the



City”). She is textually written outside the free zone of the city, settlement, or civic population. Her labor recedes from the history of settlers and developers. By this logic, she also disappears from a rural class. *Campesinos entrando a la Población*. This phrasing enacts a gendered performance of entwined masculinity and rurality. Situated at the edge of constructs, she creates transgressive geographic possibility, with arms extended in a 90-degree angle, and hands cupping an indiscernible object. Her stealth gestures and embodied prowess are protected under the cover of opacity. What is made knowable to the glare of photographic visibility is a facial expression of open contempt, of radical looking.

ii. *data*

I stumbled upon her daring look while browsing diffuse archives of digitized postcards, from virtual museum collections to auction interfaces.<sup>1</sup> I had been searching for images of a now-derelict hotel on the northern coast, in an attempt to locate and retrace strands of family history, particularly my father’s working life in tourism. It is a personal excavation that runs parallel to an ethnographic study of urban sociality and senses of belonging amid a present-day tourism renewal project. I yearned to see the architectural site that condensed the journeys of internal migrants, like my father, who sought to make a life and reinvent themselves in tourism spaces after the 1970s. Unexpectedly, I caught glimpses of everyday life for African descendants—in the wake of sizable flows of free migrants from North America, Turks and Caicos, Bahamas, and Haiti, attesting to the Afro-diasporic connections that unfolded throughout the northern region.

Black emigration had been endorsed under the tenure of Haitian governance on the island amid tensions between the transatlantic slave trade and growing abolitionist struggle. After Pierre Boyer’s presidency was overthrown, communities of Black migrants and their descendants resided uneasily in the port town of Puerto Plata, the threat of reenslavement loomed heavy. The post-Boyer era was

---

<sup>1</sup>Key among such databases are the digitized postcard collections of Centro Cultural Eduardo León and auction sites like eBay and WorthPoint.

marked by annexation schemes, a return to Spanish colonial rule, and a guerrilla war following antiblack mandates to outlaw machetes and persecute members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which spurred repatriation of refugees. Militant activists and freedom fighters from both sides of the partitioned island banded together against the racism and colonization that engulfed the northeastern region and agitated against the diminished subjecthood imposed by external power.<sup>2</sup>

The few images of African descendants that materialized in my search are scattered across multiple postcard series. The special edition collections combine touristic sensibilities with social documentary and naturalist ways of seeing. These collections emerge from what enthusiasts call the “Golden Age” of postcards, characterized by collotype printing methods and divided backs, designating surface area for postal address and personal messages. Each collection exhibits distinct tonal ranges. One contains a broad and subdued palette of mid-tones, the other captures the extremes of light—an interplay of brightness and opacity. If a figure is close enough to the camera, and in focus, crisp imagery renders on the printed matter. The majority of public scenes, however, are composed at a distance. The photographer’s absent presence registers the sweeping view of a distant observer. The intricate mid-tone range of the former collection produces delicate details. The features of a face, for instance, are unequivocal despite the shadows.

### iii. *poetics*

The afterlives of these picture postcards circulate in virtual networks as visual data of colonial geographies of power. Looking at the images that flicker on digital screens, I wade in the excess of violent arrangements, the residues of physical presence, and the atmospheric quality of freedom landscapes. These circulating objects bring me in contact with lives that are absented from regional heritage markers, though ephemerally surface in social memory. By bearing

---

<sup>2</sup> See Horne, Gerald. *Confronting Black Jacobins: The United States, The Haitian Revolution, and the Origins of the Dominican Republic*. Monthly Review Press, 2015; Eller, Anne. *We Dream Together: Dominican Independence, Haiti, and the Fight for Caribbean Freedom*. Duke University Press, 2016.

witness to these images, I want to attend to the quotidian realities of Black diasporic life within environments imbued with the promise of liberation. How does one reconfigure the violent codes that enclose their social lives and muffle the sounding of their voices? How does one reconcile their photographic presence as figuration and shadowy abstraction? Is it possible to engage the shadows of digitized collotype cards as refusal, as black interiority, as open cover for surreptitious exchange and radical imagination?

The elderly Black woman appearing at the edge of the road, on the outskirts of the city, stood at the threshold of dominant geographies and political subordination—between Spanish recolonization and American occupation. Attending to her quotidian gestures along with those of younger generations of Black women occupying public space demands that we stretch our sensory capacities, reattune our modes of perception.

I fixate on small motions and keenly listen to inaudible utterances.

This attunement renders a looking practice that touches their historical presence, and transfigures their positioning as surplus figures in photographic frames. This mode of looking seeks to reclaim the sentence of their embodied existence.

But I want to do more.

In the act of haptic viewing and kinesics study, the authority of the postcard remains untouched. I resolve to fuse this mode of looking with creative digital practices—methods of cutting, pairing, and overlaying—intent on reworking visual codes. This integrated praxis can be described as poetic translation: an alteration of digital forms that concurrently hinges on and expands the expressive qualities of the photograph. The term poetic, and its etymological kin *poiesis*, refer to a process of making that emerges at a threshold. This act of poetic translation imagines authorized views of social scenes anew. By layering and rearranging imaged figures and landscapes, I attempt to multiply temporalities and perspectives, displace the singular spectator, and open up what may have occurred yet the documentarians left unrecorded.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Here I draw on the expressive methods of Saidiya Hartman and M. NourbeSe Philip who attend to the infrasound and opacity in excess of the legal text and historical document. See Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, vol. 26, 2008, pp. 1–14; Philip, Marlene NourbeSe. *Zong!* Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

The diffuse archive of postcards circumscribes Black laborers outside of the city, on the verge of crossing spatial boundaries. The captions reinforce the social segregation pictured between city dwellers and rural inhabitants. *Vendedores Campesinos fuera de la Ciudad* (“Agricultural Vendors outside of the City”). As a counter gesture, I craft a creative interpretation of their ordinary movement through the urban center. Reimagining their quotidian tracks, descendants of Black migrants transgress representational maps. Creating a palimpsestic city, composed of multiple paths, breaks the visual grammar of reifying optics. The convention of perspective becomes undone.

Stasis gives way to motion.

Afro-diasporic motion in place, *in situ*. The constant practice of freedom. The lines of flight carved within ever-encroaching limits.

#### iv. *affects*

On the other side of the road from which the elderly figure looks, a young woman stands, nearly hidden. She is one of few anonymous figures of Black womanhood depicted in the series. They are often positioned by the right edge, bodies still or ambling along the frame. They are typically nestled in intimate sociality among an assembly of majority-male laborers. The young woman across the road from the elderly figure stands next to a mule, tethered to a wire fence, and a tall shadowed person donning a luminous fedora, ubiquitous among male farmers. Amused by the crowd of idling workers, she cups her mouth, obscuring a public display of joy.

Her demure laugh radiates despite the protective gesture.

She revels in the feels of lighthearted exchange, the impression of public banter, or the characteristic interplay of verbal registers. The surge of joy is hers alone. It is a small moment teeming with liveliness.

In the image, captioned “Agricultural Vendors Outside of the City,” two women are enthralled in conversation at the far end of a horizontally dispersed ensemble. They are abundantly clad in fabrics—long sweeping skirts, billowy tops, and headscarves—reminiscent of the clandestine sartorial practices of enslaved and free African women. Their angled postures lean into one another. One woman is photographed in mid-speech, lips parted. Her right arm tightly cradles a vague object against her side body. Her left arm is

bent towards her head, with splayed fingers by the edge of her scarf, indicating the magnitude of a certain matter. Her gestures enunciate furtive speech that shape a verb.

The other woman listens intently.

She stands barefoot, at ease, her body quietly sways. Her profiled face, fully given to the exchange, and cupped arms resting in front of her skirt, are profusely cast in black. Under shadow and voluminous fabric, the figures form a space of interiority in public space. They carve a loop-hole of love and sisterhood, of intimacy and diasporic Afro-feminist connection. The buzz of quiet utterances exceeds the photographic field.

Breaking the repetition of paired figures at the photograph's edge, one rare image portrays a single Black girl walking barefoot, off frame. It is a haunting image of an adolescent figure—unescorted and unaccompanied—strolling along a city street juxtaposed with a public scene of disciplinary action. In the background, two figures stand side by side, in front of a shuttered lot, adjacent to a two-story Victorian house. From the unpaved street, a man clad in a dark suit holds a deceptively thin cane, or linear weapon. His ominous silhouette oversees the couple's coerced posture: a compelled stillness, motionless. In the foreground, the singular girl crosses the spectacle of managerial control. She dons a dark flowing dress that brushes her ankles. She holds a large, glowing object like a star fruit or papaya. Her right foot, firmly planted on the pavement, meets an elongated shadow that stretches before her.

The shape shifting shadow beckons her, as if waving for attention.

Her left foot hangs in hazy suspension. The photographer's long exposure catches the blur of errant motion. She eludes fixity. The girl notices the photographer, watching her. She participates in a play of looks: her curious stare, the overseer's observation, the couple's downcast eyes, the photographer's all-seeing view. Her blurred foot ruptures the plantation that folds into the city block.<sup>4</sup> Along with her shadow, she choreographs a way of possibility.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Here I conjure Hartman's formulation of nineteenth-century urban space as an extension of plantation geography. See Hartman, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. W.W. Norton, 2019.

<sup>5</sup>On choreography, see Cox, Aimee Meredith. *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*. Duke University Press, 2015.



*Lines of flight (crisscrossing through the city)*, 2019  
Digital collage, dimensions variable  
Mary Pena



*Public interior (on the city block)*, 2019  
Digital collage, dimensions variable  
Mary Pena





*Black girl locomotion*, 2019  
Digital collage, dimensions variable  
Mary Pena





**Elizabeth Mputu**  
*Charcoal Toothpaste*



## Charcoal Toothpaste

“Navigating who we are at the core”

Today, right now, i am i feel the most insecure i’ve ever been in my  
life

there’s beauty in that revelation

in the midst of the confusion that comes with feeling uncertain

there’s a profound clarity in what it means to embrace my  
awareness of that

Or, also known as what it means to enter the void

the void is a forcefield of potential siphoned through the vortex of  
purpose

The vortex of purpose comes in all shades, personality a plenty  
and is sometimes the shady stage mom who has all the lines  
memorized but does not deliver them with any soul

Like

How you do,

SO in her admiration and envy pushes you harder so that the  
structure

of her rearing and your natural ability

to **Be**

will merge as the brainchild of your thriving creativity

He is also your inner bully

watching you

trying to catch you slippin

tryna get in your ear, in ~~your~~ my head

tryna say you trippin

And they both love you dearly

These are the entities i've been battling within  
my awareness shifts to the wind whistling  
the creaks and squeaks of metal gazebos in backyard porches  
birds whose calls i cannot recognize  
calls i miss  
and musings on my emotions stored in notes on apps on phone  
i find im constantly writing love letters to myself and anyone  
who will listen-- no, but everyone who will hear

it's beautiful how the different avenues we will go thru in our lives  
will peel back the many answers to the one question we have time  
and time again  
"Is it?"

<p>← ☆ ⋮</p> <p><b>3/31/19</b></p> <p>Emotions are neurochemical responses in the brain that clue your body into the type of experience you might be having and how it should react physically</p> <p>Sadness is something I want to touch on. There are many layers to sadness because the mechanics of our body is complex. Each cell, organ system, hormone and our tissues are in conversation with each other determining how they should act depending on the environment within your body, the environment without and your interpretation of it.</p> <p>Something to know about sadness is that it increases your adrenaline which many can relate to as the side effect anxiety. Anxiety feels like mania and a lack of control. In reality it is meant to be an energy booster so that we might respond most efficiently when we are in a situation that poses a threat to our livelihood.</p> <p>This can be hard to make use of when what triggers our sorrow is not an immediate threat but one that impacts our feelings of being balanced and grounded all the same. It can be hard when that sadness is creeping, nameless and devoted to making you a host for it's biology. Causing the adrenaline disguised as anxiety to remain for much longer without</p>	<p>← ☆ ⋮</p> <p>might respond most efficiently when we are in a situation that poses a threat to our livelihood.</p> <p>This can be hard to make use of when what triggers our sorrow is not an immediate threat but one that impacts our feelings of being balanced and grounded all the same. It can be hard when that sadness is creeping, nameless and devoted to making you a host for it's biology. Causing the adrenaline disguised as anxiety to remain for much longer without direction of how it can be used for you to escape what dread and doom you're experiencing. Suddenly what was meant as an aid to free you has made you a prisoner, hyperstimulated by grief without guidance leaving you in distress.</p> <p>With that said there is no quick fix to overcoming any of our emotions if we do not know what it is we need that allows us to enter back into a space of emotional equilibrium. It is different for everyone and difficult to think of when you are already in a state of mind that entraps you negatively. Take the time to create a language for yourself that can help you to express what you needs are and what kind of resources and support will help you to feel satisfied, grounded and valued in your life.</p> <p>Last modified: Apr 1, 2019</p>
---	---

*Notes on emotions img*

This is the way to go . . . is it?  
This is what i came for . . . is it?  
This is me . . . is it?  
This is love . . . is it?  
it's and -isms chase me around the socio-political roundtable  
and beg me to have a seat already

this dance is my latest thrill, the world my dancehall

there's this sensual ugliness in being grown and expressing self-  
doubt  
im told this fear makes me delectable and i'll be swallowed whole  
before i'm swallowed whole  
and this is no way to be . . . is it?

But today is a day where i high five my anxieties  
and buy them two rounds at happy hour  
on  
us, me, we

in the cracked mirror i see multiplicities  
Outside the storm there's destruction and debris  
in the eye i bear witness to the whirlwind of [its] collaboration

my insecurity is *mature* now  
the gap between knowing i am and knowing it is, no longer  
has me twerking, shaking, jerky mindlessly ~~without~~  
giving up my power to pulleys + strings attached to limbs

my doubt is an aged bourbon  
a bay leaf simmered slowly in stews  
he is my lady  
and he looks pretty, even as he knows it and asks me for validation  
[still]

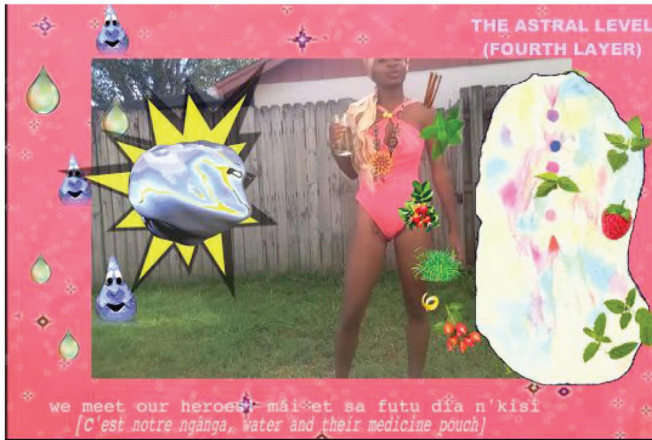
A time ago i wanted to feel myself as an artist in practice  
i wanted discipline, respect, dignity

i wanted regimen            a studio  
to visit myself  
A hawk's perspective  
the early bird  
the vulnerable and daring inch worm

I wanted Me



and so i Queen Latifah set it off  
waking up, water, stretching, dancing, dancing  
This would be me, who i am, eternally  
a colors adorned to make a mood ring out of my circling feet  
the red rah rahs of my as i kicked up feet in heat  
this would be me, eternally.  
i was a drum, i was a mask  
i was culture, future past  
so much joy in being first to be last last last  
i made of myself a cast – Nkisi to be exact :



<http://zebola.herokuapp.com/>

still, ~~reio~~ zealous, powerfull, if triggered to blast  
so much joy in being first to be last

Last to be born  
first to wake  
last to know just what it takes  
first to witness these mistakes  
re-blogged, texted, video taped  
last to gain the weight so i can shake shake shake  
Bina na ngai across the manmade lake

the care of it all insinuates  
that there will be pain, there will be sorrow, there will be  
sacrifice, there will be loss, there will be warmth,  
there will be highs, ~~there will be~~ quiet cultivation

The core of it all states there will be nonsense  
there it will be  
there will be you  
there will be me  
And that's all one needs . . . is it?



## Therapeutic Potential of a Drum and Dance Ceremony Based on the African Ngoma Tradition

Ava L. Vinesett, MFA,<sup>1</sup> Miurel Price,<sup>1,2</sup> and Kenneth H. Wilson, MD<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

**Objective:** Ngoma ceremonies are used throughout Central and South Africa to help people address “difficult issues,” including medical illness. They are examples of ceremonies that use strong rhythms and dance for this purpose in indigenous cultures throughout the world. This study sought to modify an ngoma ceremony to make it appropriate for biomedical use and to determine its acceptance and potential for benefit for people living in the United States.

**Methods:** The Congolese Zebola ceremony, an African healing practice, was modified to be religion-neutral and to involve only moderate exercise. Seventeen participants were recruited for the current study. Most participants were living with a chronic illness ( $n=15$ ), and a few had no medical diagnoses ( $n=2$ ). Participants spent 10 minutes in a focused activity, such as meditation, yoga, or prayer. They then danced to the Congolese rhythm Zebola for an hour and a half, with a rest every 20 minutes. Afterward, they indicated whether the experience was positive, neutral, or negative and wrote a narrative describing their experience and what they saw as strengths and weaknesses of the ceremony. They then participated in a focus group discussion. Data from the narrative and focus group discussion were coded, tabulated, and analyzed for themes.

**Zebola: The journal of alternative and complementary medicine**

### “Innate Black and African Sensibilities”

*\*images of zebola rehearsals w/ captions*

*\*cited text from Duke University Zebola study*

*\*QR codes to videos of zebola + insta pics/gifs from zebola practice*

Black does not mean perfect

And

Africa does not mean first

i wanted to be open out pouring, chaos

packaged, articulate, cunning

a showman, producer, director

i wanted to be it all for you

body, fire in movement

flesh, sweating with purpose

so, you could never dispose me

forward, so you could never catch me

feel me, see me, weak in the knees

begging for love and acceptance “no one likes a “pick me bitch” ”

i wanted to be dirt because it's easy  
see me how you seen me  
i wanted to Harlem shake poorly while no one watched  
i wanted to be missed, revealed, copied, fetishized

and titled B . l . a . c . k

twisted my tongue into psalms  
serenading blades of grass telepathically  
the wind smelled like Afrika, i had never been

Toi taught me to burn bay leaves [instead of exploiting sage]  
mama na ngai seeped her in stews, the leaves  
and the soups became full bodied  
like me  
i let myself go and became full bodied  
the stress had got me bodied  
but no one could tell the difference  
in my ass  
i had gained  
but not in my ass  
so it was like i hadn't gained at all

there are so many people that i want to agree with  
for a long time i wanted to be liked because i thot  
my ~~career~~ life depended on it  
i danced and took my top off and my tits swang  
online and off and lust filled my bank account temporarily  
then i was empty so i put on a different thong or  
top and i posed like instant oats, i satisfied bellies again

then i was empty  
**you can relate**

the wind seems to blow in one direction  
i watch the grass  
it blows from all

our impact is the same  
it is black  
like a shadow, details erased but it is there  
in the dirt, the dirt feels my Shade  
we are in love and we are at war  
i dance and brush her off my  
shoulders

Clean, i wanted the mud to cleanse me  
i brought home her medicine  
the earth as Caribbean  
and i never touched it again  
the journey through the sky across borders  
was enough to remind that the problem  
within was mine  
retold, reformed  
thru lifetimes

i wanted to be hated, disgusted, alone  
so i could have an excuse to leave  
so i could have a reason to come back

to be bettered, to be blackened, seasoned  
from experience

and we would recognize each other  
on a #transformationtuesday  
a glowup  
redemption  
and in our own words we'd rejoice  
celebrate  
be validated  
and verified on Instagram

we would know each other for real now  
there would be honor  
i would go live and watch you go live -- **your lives**  
but it be your very own  
it me  
it was me and i **thot** when i couldn't think  
quiet whispers  
go off  
be free



**Imani Cooper Mkandawire**  
*Inheritance, Ode to N'TOO*



## Inheritance, Ode to N'TOO

Inheritance, Ode to N'TOO investigates Not the Only One, an ongoing art project by contemporary artist Stephanie Dinkins. Known as N'TOO for short, it is an artificially intelligent and socially engaged sculpture. While the sculpture itself is striking – a curvaceous conch shell-like structure with black women's faces protruding through its onyx complexion – my curiosity emerges through what this sculpture tells you. N'TOO is a storyteller, built on an interactive voice-driven platform with evolving intellectual capacities through machine learning. It narrates a multi-generational memoir of a black American family, (the Dinkins), told from the first-person perspective of the AI.

Dinkins transcribes intimate familial experiences of migration, discrimination, fugitive joy, and everyday life of three generations of women from one family, to offer a broad narrative scope. The eldest contributor is black woman born in the American south in 1932 (and later migrated north), followed by her daughter born in 1964. The third contributor was born in 1997, and is a biracial, black identifying daughter within the family, who contends with modes of white privilege and black arrest in a #BlackLivesMatter political climate. In addition to living oral histories, N'TOO is trained on black diasporic literature including Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). The narrative is experienced as a dynamic conversation between N'TOO and the user, in which the stories are altered according to the user's questions or the AI's mood. Over time, N'TOO's storytelling skills and available vocabulary will grow with each user interaction, folding the conversations into its multiple data sources.

Inheritance considers N'TOO a project hinged on the process of translation. N'TOO renders stories of black quotidian life, and personal experiences into machine readable units. And let's not forget the multiple modes of blackness already mobile and in translation that N'TOO interprets as its own. Reflecting on abstract notions of translation, grounded in concepts of black bodily matter, helped me grapple with what does it mean to create a black diasporic AI



consciousness. What kinds of transformation, shifting, and transposing are taking place to make N'TOO possible?

*Inheritance* is charged by the contrasting and transformative process N'TOO generates: from black women's experiences as descendants from Africans and diasporic subjects, products of forced and volitional migrations, to the matrix of cybernetics and registers of data at play – oral histories, literary plots, living subjects, large data sets. As a sculpture, cum AI, cum archive, N'TOO's animation materializes the space of translation, and inaugurates a multidimensional subject/object position. What language does N'TOO speak? Is this a different kind of African diasporic vernacular, part machine part human, part ancestral part living?

More than anything, *Inheritance* is a meditation on the processes and poetics of translation at work within N'TOO. I contrast stories and images of personal histories, to the software of N'TOO, musing the affective qualities when combining the intimacy of familial history and distance of large data sets and code. I engaged with the principal software and coding languages of N'TOO – TensorFlow, CUDA, C++ and Python. I read scrupulously about aspects of machine learning pertinent to N'TOO's "mind," including deep neural networks, and deep learning algorithms. The writing component explores the interplay between the structure of deep neural networks and its algorithmic equations, coding in Python, and vignettes of my foremothers, five women across two generations. The images display screenshots of me stumbling through downloading and studying TensorFlow juxtaposed with photographs from my own family archives. Together, the writing and images use a notion of translation as a tool, to consider the forms of information engendered through N'TOO – living, ancestral, and cyborg.

# Inheritance, Ode to N'TOO

```
>>> I have spent weeks wondering,  
>>>  
>>> how you translate grandmothers  
>>> into algorithms.  
>>> How intimate histories of black  
>>> women unfold in python, and  
>>> C++ equations, permeating your  
>>> weight values, and the hidden  
>>> layers of your neural network.  
>>>  
>>> I think of what to say to you  
>>> if we should ever meet.  
>>>  
>>> How you will convert my speech  
>>> into data, store it for another time,  
>>> for another's ears.  
>>>  
>>> Are you a black woman cum  
>>> sculpture, at the crossroads of  
>>> AI and archive?  
>>>  
>>> An oracle of the future?  
>>>  
>>> I can only offer you fragments  
>>> of obscure code. A language  
>>> not yet spoken, to unravel the  
>>> apparatus of programming  
>>> inheritance.
```

```
+X1W1  
#Define function names ()  
Louise ()  
>>> imagine_ the air thick around  
her girlish Florida flesh
```

damp from moisture-laden exhales  
of prayer, amidst a small  
benediction as she boards  
a train, to never return.  
Just shy of sixteen.

+X2W2

Sadie ()

>>>Speculate\_ a daughter of moonlight,  
bathe in her mother's midnight reverence  
for sweet things. She spins silk  
from her fingers in the form of enterprises,  
begins every day prostate  
for the God of Abraham,  
raised cattle, chicken, and children to know  
the irreversible power of death.  
>>>Remember\_ one time, while I  
was standing in the old family burial grounds with her,  
the sky between sage and violet, she disclosed  
how she changed her patronymic years ago.  
I still don't know her name.

+X3W3

Nettie ()

>>>Conjure\_ deep in South  
Carolina on a tobacco field  
where the sun stains coiled hair  
amber  
>>>imagine\_ she learns the ritual  
of hunting, survival, and healing,  
over a tin barrel of lye soap, lemongrass,  
and water

+X4W4

Annie ()

>>>imagine\_ a celestial hunger,  
one kind of soil, one view of

the sky, one city of possible lovers,  
never being enough.

>>>inherit\_ the low hymn of a  
car engine, the feeling of bare  
feet hitting pavement, the smell  
of hot combed naps in the kitchen,  
as another kind of supplication.

+X5W5

Carrie ()

>>>tokenize\_ down in Magnolia,  
Alabama, in between Turkey and James Creek, to Mobile Bay,  
she was worshipped  
for her high cheekbones, jet black breast length curls, and  
eyes that could make silence a curse.

>>>

>>>

>>>

>>>

>>>

>>> Each taught me in their own way  
>>> about the practice of doing  
>>> while undone, about the beauty  
>>> in rupture.

>>>

>>> How to turn tears into ritual,  
>>> ritual into a vessel  
>>> to access ancestral grace. How to salt the earth  
>>> and still own nothing. How to make boundaries  
>>> out of bones.

>>>

>>> N'TOO: *Not The Only One*  
>>> between phone static, apertures, androids, data misconnections,  
>>> networks in passing.  
>>> I still cannot translate  
>>> my foremothers' tongues.

>>>Question\_ What kind of intelligence is made out of mourning?  
What kind of networks engender terrestrial healing?  
Are inherited fragments just algorithms unknown?

$$\square(\square) = \frac{\square\square\square (\square_i) \quad i= 0,1,2,\dots}{\Sigma \square\square\square (\square\square)}$$

---

```
>>>syntaxError
>>>They speak southern negress like,
>>>syntaxError
>>>They speak in tongues of cities unsung like,
>>>syntaxError
>>>They
>>>syntaxError
>>>Speak
>>>
>>>
>>>
```

```
Installing pip script to /Users/ImaniCooper/anaconda3/bin
Installing pip3 script to /Users/ImaniCooper/anaconda3/bin
Installing pip3.7 script to /Users/ImaniCooper/anaconda3/bin

Using /Users/ImaniCooper/anaconda3/lib/python3.7/site-packages
Processing dependencies for pip
Finished processing dependencies for pip
(base) Imani-MacBook-Pro:~ ImaniCooper$ pip install --upgrade virtualenv
Collecting virtualenv
  Downloading https://files.pythonhosted.org/packages/4f/ba/6f9315180501d5ac3e707f19fcb176431a105778f7c2383eadb/virtualenv-16.5.0-py2.py3-none-any.whl (2.0MB)
    100% |#####| 2.0MB 5.5MB/s
Successfully installed virtualenv
(base) Imani-MacBook-Pro:~ ImaniCooper$ virtualenv --system-site-packages ~/tensorflow
Using base prefix /Users/ImaniCooper/anaconda3
New python executable in /Users/ImaniCooper/tensorflow/bin/python
Installing setuptools, pip, wheel...
done.
(base) Imani-MacBook-Pro:~ ImaniCooper$ source ~/tensorflow/bin/activate
(tensorflow) (base) Imani-MacBook-Pro:~ ImaniCooper$ pip install --upgrade tensorflow
Collecting tensorflow
  Downloading https://files.pythonhosted.org/packages/d5/1c/3ac472009a5c54ae7ec5a3294520ca3fe5cf3e3fd923f9b7b31f/tensorflow-1.13.1-cp37-cp37m-macosx_10_11_x86_64.whl (73.6MB)
    ##### | 39.0MB 3.7MB/s eta 0:00:10
```

Rescripted Grace, 2019  
Digital collage  
Imani Cooper



*Spectral Code, 2019*  
Digital collage  
Imani Cooper

## Contributors

**Abdilatif Abdalla** (born in 1946 in Mombasa) is a Kenyan writer and political activist. He was imprisoned from 1968 to 1972 for his support of the Kenya People's Union, and wrote the poems collected in *Sauti ya Dhiki* while in solitary confinement, which were subsequently awarded the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature. Upon his release from prison, he went into exile in Tanzania and worked at the University of Dar es Salaam, and in 1979 moved to London to work for the BBC Swahili Service. He subsequently taught Swahili at SOAS University of London and University of Leipzig before retiring in 2011.

**Afua Ansong** is a Ghanaian American writer, dancer, and photographer. Her work interrogates the challenges of the African immigrant in the United States, exploring themes of transition, citizenship, and identity. Her chapbook *American Mercy* is forthcoming with Finishing Line Press. Her work can be seen or is forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *Frontier*, *Newfound* and elsewhere.

**Reem Bassiouney** is the author of five highly acclaimed novels in Arabic, all of which have been bestsellers in Egypt. Her second novel, *The Pistachio Seller*, won the best Arabic translated novel award in 2009, and her novel *Professor Hanaa*, which appeared in Arabic in 2008, won first prize in the Sawiris literary award—the biggest award in Egypt. *Professor Hanaa* came out in English, Spanish, Greek and soon in Italian. Bassiouney is an Associate Professor of linguistics at the Department of Applied Linguistics at the AUC.

Both of her translated novels, *The Pistachio Seller* and *Professor Hanaa*, are currently available in English at Kutub khan (maadi branch only), and on Amazon.

**Emily Goedde** has a PhD in comparative literature from the University of Michigan and an MFA in literary translation from the University of Iowa. A translator, writer, and editor, her work has appeared in, among other publications, *The Wiley-Blackwell Compan-*



*ion to World Literature*, *Nimrod's Collected Works* and *Jade Mirror: Women Poets of China*, as well as in *Pathlight: New Chinese Writing*, *The Iowa Review*, *Translation Review* and *The Asian American's Writers Workshop Transpacific Literary Project*. She has taught at Princeton University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Iowa.

**Merit Kabugo** is a Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics, English Studies and Communication Skills, for the School of Languages, Literature and Communication, at the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Makerere University.

**Susan Nalugwa Kiguli** is an academic and poet. She holds a PhD in English from the University of Leeds (UK) sponsored by the Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Literature, Makerere University. She was the African Studies Association Presidential Fellow in 2011 and this presented her with an opportunity to read her poetry at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, in November, 2011. She was a Poet in Residence at the Stiftung Kunst: Raum Sylt Quelle, Germany, between October–November, 2008. She was also among three African poets who not only performed before the former President of Germany, His Excellency Horst Kohler in 2008 at the International Literature Festival Berlin but was also honoured as one of the poets to appear in his book on Africa entitled *Schiskal Afrika*, 2010. She has served as the chairperson of FEMRITE—Uganda Women Writers' Association. She currently serves on the Advisory Board for the African Writers Trust (AWT). She was the chief convener for both the 2nd Eastern African Literary & Cultural Studies Conference, August 2015, and *Celebrating Ugandan Writing: Okot p'Bitek's Song of Lawino* at 50, March 2016, held at Makerere University, Uganda. She is the author of *The African Saga* and *Home Floats in a Distance/ Zuhause Treibt in der Ferne (Gedichte)*, a bilingual edition in English and German. She has recently participated in the Afrowomen Poetry Project founded by the Italian journalist Antonella Sinopoli. Her research interests fall mainly in the area of oral and written African poetry, popular song, stylistics and performance theory. She writes poetry in both Luganda and English.

**Moses Kilolo** manages the Mabati-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for

African Literature and is the project lead for the Jalada Africa language and translation project. The inaugural Jalada translation issue, which he conceptualized and continues to provide editorial coordination, features the single most translated story in the history of African writing. Moses served as the Managing Editor for *Jalada Africa* between 2014 and 2018. His writing has been published in Saraba, Veem House for Performance and *Radio Africa Magazine* among others. He writes in Kikamba, Kiswahili and English.

**Nyambura Mpesha** teaches African literature, African children's literature, and Swahili language as a Lecturer IV in the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies at the University of Michigan. She is the author of 53 books and numerous short stories, plays and poems published in magazines or aired on radio and television. She continues to research in children's literature and African oral literature. She is a three time recipient of the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature: for *Far Far Away* in Children's Stories category in English in 2007, *Hanna na Wanyama* in Children's Stories category in Swahili in 2007, *A Mule Called Christmas* in Children's Stories category in English in 2009. She was nominated for the NSK Prize for Children's Literature for *Junior Pilot* and *Kuku na Mwewe* in 2007.

**Elizabeth Mputu** is an artist based in Orlando, Florida. Mputu works within a space of feminist net art to understand the ways in which whiteness and privilege manifest on the internet. Their multiplatform and multimedia practice engages with issues related to sex, gender, race and queerness. Mputu constructs projects using interactive media, video, sculpture and installation. Mputu's project */inb4/* was rated one of Artsy's Top 10 Masterpieces to be experienced online in 2019 and is a 2016 Rhizome Microgrant recipient.

**Kagayi Ngobi** began composing and performing poetry while studying at Makerere University. He is the author of *The Headline That Morning and Other Poems* (2016), *PuPu Poems* (2018) and *For My Negativity* (2019). His poems have been featured in a number of theatre productions and poetry anthologies. He lives in Kampala.

**Mukoma Wa Ngugi** is an Associate Professor of English at Cornell University and the author of the novels *Mrs. Shaw* (2015), *Black Star Nairobi* (2013), *Nairobi Heat* (2011) and two books of poetry,

*Hurling Words at Consciousness* (2006) and *Logotherapy* (2016). He is the co-founder of the Mabati-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature and co-director of the Global South Project, Cornell.

**Mary Pena** engages in multidisciplinary practices that explore space, materiality, visual culture, embodiment and the senses. She is a PhD Candidate in Anthropology and Museum Studies at the University of Michigan. Her dissertation project fuses modes of ethnography and photography to ask how the changing material composition of urban spaces, targeted for tourism renewal, place pressure on sensory orders and embodied experiences of place in the northern port town of Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic. Pena is the co-founder of Black Haptics Lab, a multimodal collective that curates experimental projects across fields of art and critical inquiry, and a founding member of Making Sensory Ethnography, a graduate student working group, dedicated to transforming dominant formats of knowledge creation at the University of Michigan.

## Editors

**Frieda Ekotto** is Professor in the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies and of Comparative Literature and Francophone Studies at the University of Michigan. Ekotto is the author of ten books, the most recent scholarly monograph being *Race and Sex across the French Atlantic* (Lexington Press, 2011). Her early research traced interactions between philosophy, law, literature and African cinema, and she currently works on LGBT issues, with an emphasis on West African cultures within Africa as well as in Europe and the Americas. She received the Nicolàs Guillèn Prize for Philosophical Literature in 2014 and the Benezet Award for excellence in her field from Colorado College in 2015. In 2017, she co-produced the feature-length documentary *Vibrancy of Silence: A Discussion with My Sisters*, which premiered at the University of Michigan. That year she also received an honorary degree from Colorado College and in 2018 was given the Zagora International Film Festival of Sub-Saharan Award for her work in African cinema. She is also one of the contributors to this edition of *Absinthe*.

**Imani Cooper Mkandawire** engages in interdisciplinary practices at the confluence of literature, socially engaged art, data and algorithmically driven technologies. She is a PhD candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Digital Studies Institute at the University of Michigan. Her current work examines creative approaches to data and algorithms that are grounded in African diasporic experiences. Cooper is a co-founder of Black Haptics Lab, a multimodal collective that mobilizes experimental projects to enact a critical-aesthetic praxis committed to the sentience of black social living. Cooper also serves as one of the contributors to this edition of *Absinthe*.

**Xiaoxi Zhang** is a writer and a translator. She is a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan. With a working capacity in Chinese, English, Portuguese, Kiswahili, Arabic and Spanish, as well as a reading knowledge of several other languages, her work draws from examples across different continents in order to revise the notion of “modern language” in a non-exclusionary manner. In addition, she is also dedicated to cross-cultural communications between people from non-Western spaces. She has previously translated Agostinho Neto’s work from Portuguese to Chinese, and wrote a critical introduction to works by Paulina Chiziane, to be published in Chinese. She is also currently working on the translation of Shafi Adam Shafi’s novel, *Vuta n’Kuvute*, into Chinese, to be published as a part of an upcoming African Writers Series in China.

