

JKS Makokha

The Game of Gravestone Country

There is a country
out there where
gravestones still are
the national toys of choice.
There thousands
and their umpires
assemble annually
in the strange stadiums
of colonial cemeteries
without fail,
without delay
with much fanfare
under solar media glare
on each Day of Independence.
Hems of calico or cotton skirts
are tucked as are cuffs of khaki shirts.
Tension mounts as sweat drops!
Taut ears await the whistle blows.....
Sweet victory always goes to those
Who while well blindfolded
randomly uproot the oldest
colonial gravestone tablet
in a given acre of a chosen
graveyard for that year.

Night of Exit^{*}

The night before that of his exit,
no cricket a single note chirped
as do crickets here on usual nights.
No breeze a single tune whistled. None.
Behind the urinal spot in this fig grove,
neither a shy crescent nor a twinkling star afar
peeped down at him from Night's blanket edge.
The prison in slumber had become one huge coffin
buried under the still dome of the deepest darkness.

^{*} Poem dedicated to the late Dedan Kimathi (1920-1957). The self-styled field marshal led the Kenyan forces of Mau Mau armed resistance against British colonial rule in the 1950s. He was later captured, convicted, hanged and buried in an unmarked grave outside Kamiti Maximum Prison on the northern outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya.

The next night, night of his exit,
12 random slum and suburb rascals
howled 21 stanzas in a long mongrel mourn
as the falter-faltering footfalls
of the hounds' masters, homebound drunks,
mixed with their bawdiest vernacular ballads
to bid him his very final elegiac farewell,
well past midnight when the jail undertaker
had in secret
alone
planted his corpse,
a suspected seed of sin,
in an anonymous hole of black gravel
behind the silent cells.

The Poet in a State of Emergency

i have spoken some words
whose verbal flight sent
them to the six corners
of our sealed homeland
before bringing them back,
like echoes of stubborn hope,
into my mouth still agape,
Dropping back inside,
as new echoes around my heart.

i have eaten my own words,
i whose tongue these words
once had, held, then hurled free
only for them backwards to flee,
back through split lips into me
in tragicomic mimicry of ruminants
that first chew then hurl inward
a fist of cud, then outward
then inward now with a sense of finality.

i of these words starkly uttered,
do solemnly now take them all back in.
To gain freedom my words tried hard
but weren't they turned back again
at the sealed exit points of our six borders?
Now then let these words of freedom rest
in worm nests and ulcers in my intestines,
in the neighbourhood where my bile resides.
On my parched tongue let their aftertastes
be my sole reminder of cuisine eaten in free states.

The Book of Life

she stood still,
penciled
on this page of
pain in the book
of life as her tears—
black watery stains—
flushed into oblivion
down a foreign toilet.
silence.

she stood so still in
heels steel of hue
holding her life
as she did her
eye pencil—
weakly.
silence.

she stood still as
fractured mirrors and
walls of wise graffiti
hugged her tight until
all her liquid hope was
out and she knew
it was time a new
image to draw
of herself.
again.