

THE BROKEN COLUMN

ALFRED NYAGAKA NYAMWANGE

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Eyes I dare not meet in dream
In death's dream kingdom
These do not appear;
There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column
There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In the wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.

(From the poem, *The Hollow Men* by T.S. Eliot)

DEDICATION

For the best storytellers, I ever listened to, Aska Mokobo Oyunge and Milkah Moraa Gwaro, wherever in the constellations of the galaxy they soar.

For the late Mwalimu Jackson Misiocha Miyogo, for launching me into the endless treasures of literature and training my pen to dance.

For David Nyamwange and Dinah Kerubo for turning my curiosity about Gusii folk to something alive and real.

For George Ochoti's undying hope on the work's potential.

For my family, Nyariangi, Ogwoka, Magoma and Bosire for dreaming beyond bed confines and giving me wings to fly. And above all, God's saving Grace that has made everything possible.

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BOOK ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Okeyo's body burned with a strange and indescribable fire, his face a mask of pain that continued grimacing. He leaned forward, one hand on the nearby wooden wall, his thoughts configuring and radiating simultaneously as if fleeing from his tormentor. The pain was hot, building to a crescendo so fast, he wanted to cry. He closed his eyes and wished to close his ears too to the sounds rising around him but he couldn't. When he opened them there were tears in them.

Overheard, the wind whipped the tree branches in a low whispering song, so companionable and akin to the dry season. As a man who spent most of his time crouching in the bush at night, there was nothing yet to scare him to alertness. Only the sounds of the animals and their silhouettes in the shadows of the giant acacia that dimmed the light of the moon in the cattle pen reached his ears. With them came the embarrassing memories of his father's voice when his frame towering above him drowned today's burning, opening raw wounds yet to heal.

When it happened, the old man had been obviously attracted by the animals' cries and came to check. The animal kept lurching as it bleated fearfully and the smell of her fur mixed with urine and dung smothered his nostrils.

The burning had been so intense, so bad and so urgent. He felt the explosion approaching deep inside him... Growing like a flaming fire, on the warm, greasy, welcoming animal smells...And he

pushed, pushed...and the struggles to him were motivating, taking him in circles, in an arc...

It was like those days when leaning against the wall... The competition to shoot further with other village rascals... The burst of good-natured laughter as other boys excelled; others failed miserably, as they like old men swung the drops between their feet. That was the boys' best game.

That was when a blade of a spear had materialized before his eyes, shining slightly before the dimly-star-lit-night, steadily and carefully aimed, startling him to his senses. A sudden fear benumbed his brains and limbs. And there was a blow, a sharp pain on his cheek. He had fallen into the damp, moist ground littered with animal dung, in embarrassment waiting for the pain of death. Every part of his body had been covered with mud and dung.

There had been momentary darkness, and when he came to, the sky was a big arc in a distance with scattered holes, like ones seen from a broken thatch. A face was peering down on him. A set of ferocious eyes in the moonlight, and a silhouette of a big stick, raised. That was how death loomed above him; in that stick and he was afraid, very afraid. Yet he wouldn't move his body to escape it. A strong hand yanked him up and dragged him along the muddy and damp ground, into some grass batch.

He had silently wondered if this was how death descended on one. Immobilizing every limb and dragging him around like dead

meat. A light had struck his eyes and he opened one eye, then the other one with some effort.

That face above him had been the face of death, set and drawn around a snarl. He visualized his blood, and brains, trickling out of the next blow, from his split head. A sudden surge, a sudden wave of energy had awoken his paralyzed limbs.

“Doing this? How many sacrifices will ever right things for one so sick?” the old man had continued lamenting as he hauled his limp body along the ground.

The fact that the animals’ sounds were subdued meant they had moved some bit away. A firefly drew beautiful orange circles of light around the thick branches of a nearby hawthorn bush. That light lit the dark walls of Okeyo’s heart and prised open his mind a little. A light-dark oval face with braided hair and big white eyes flashed in his mind, her lips curled in the final footnotes of mocking laughter. It was a picture of a young woman engraved somewhere in the core of his mind of yesteryear.

Then a fleeting thought that he shouldn’t allow himself die crossed his mind for a moment. He thought of taking a vantage view to ensconce himself of that laughter. Again and again even when it was very clear, he was the object of ridicule; as if he desired to see its very end. He visualised, the final curl of those lips; the final twist in them that would show that everything had finally climaxed to its cathartic end. Never again to rupture into anything about him feebly like the last

kicks of a young hind whose warm blood ebbed until it lay still in his hands.

This was when his body muscles drew back their energy, sucking it slowly into his limp body and in a burst of youthful strength. He instantly double-rolled, sprung up and leapt and was gone, knocking walls, fences. His shocked captor had lunged at him but missed. He leapt over a low bush and bounded to freedom. Behind him, he could hear the old man's muffled chuckle. And behind that chuckle were the villages' mean faces making sport of him.

As he stole away, a dark shadow of shame had hung on his mind. It was like a wave, surging, pulling him under, and drowning him as he crawled into his bed. He smelled of cow dung but he had no time to wash it off. Those familiar mocking eyes, peering down on him filled him with fresh shame. How would he ever face the world? ...so they knew?

He couldn't fall asleep as everything shook him with mortal fear while his heart thundered against his ribcage, threatening to burst out. It was a total embarrassment.

Then, snatches of the old man's cutting words: "It's a shame, a stain in my family and men die for doing this. Who in his right mind will live with it? Who?"

This was only good as a personal secret. But soon it would be out, through the listening bushes as his people said and amplified in every drying square of the village. He would still hear the old man's shaking voice barely a hoarse whisper. A voice entwined with the

night booming inside his mind, sending other waves of guilt that further petrified him.

Omagwa, the old man and his father, was renowned for his astuteness, and tenacity even when the situation was perturbing and an emergency. Being a senior elder who embodied the community's cultural lore and its rich history, the villages' decisions naturally showed the touch of his hand, even when fronted by the *etureti*, the council of elders.

Okeyo thought of the revelation of his heinous deed to the village and the fear got a total grip of him. It multiplied like ripples in a pool of water where a huge rock had been hurled into.

These were some of the things that made a man long for death, from that raised stick, the very way a dry ground yearns for water. Apparently, things would have been even better if the old man had driven the spear through his heart. Death was a better fate than the public humiliation, ostracizing him, whispers at his back that could haunt his goddamn life. But he was a real fighter and fighters never chicken out of life. They faced struggles and challenges squarely and left a clean legacy.

Perhaps the old man was a tolerant secret keeper! And maybe nothing of the embarrassment would ever be heard anywhere beyond that kraal.

He had lived to remember it, always expecting it in the voices of his friend and foe, all these years as his father grew frail, and lots of things unfolded.

Later, when the dust was about to settle, he would hear the old man was arranging some marriage for him. At best he thought it was a mere rumour until his cousin Bonuke hinted it and the misgivings started. With things like this, the option was either swim or sink. He had decided to swim along for the old geezer had a bargaining card stuck up, something he would use to his own accord. What could he use as an excuse to tell him that his will and desire lay in the girl with the oval face-braided-mocking laughter? The one who held another ace bigger than life: the one who was key to all that afflicted him.

And today when he kept vigil with the other warriors the same burning had again enveloped him. For a while disabling him, characteristically incessant and agonizing.

His confused thoughts went to the rugged terrain inhabited by the community with its mammalian hills. The stiff-backed ridges, scooped ravines and vaulted valleys peopled with a natural green that was strikingly and refreshingly comforting. The land gave nurture to her people and animals just like a big-time mother while the meandering numerous rivers crisscrossed her rich bosom quenching her thirst, their thirst.

The six clans of the land lived close to one another in a bid to safeguard their future by numbers, sucking her succulence and sap. This was how they survived the rout of *Abanacha Marwa*, the knee cutting ferocious enemies, who always sought their cattle with a vehemence unseen from the Gere and Umbwa traveling around.

The night was ever long, crawling with dangerous cats and big monsters that would crush the life out of one within seconds. Thus, the duty of every man, every living soul was to defend his own from them, parry every marauder. It happened full circle of the day using any weapon from a club, sharpened stick, spear, arrow, and sword, anything.

The land was a good rooster within whose ample feathers all her chicks found a home. The big and small clans, the Getutu, the Girango, the Basi, the Nyaribari, the Nchari and the Machoge, the way Engoro, the great keeper and creator, had always wanted it to be when he founded his people and gave them this fertile land for sustenance. Within these clans were villagers that like suckers grew and reached their fingers to entwine other villages all over the clan in marriage relationships whose honour was cemented by payment of the bride price of cattle. This marked permanence and gave respect to the institution of marriage from whence flowed the strength and future of every clan like a never drying river that owned its rejuvenating source.

And you never killed a clansman or an in-law, using sharp-edged weapons as these were those from whom one married or married to. The cleansing ritual in case you killed a clan fellow was punishing and out of reach, so you beat them with a club and left them alive, *enda ya mabere*, a stomach for digesting milk, to tell the story.

“The animals are now safe. Those boys will not dare come back... after that thrashing.” Bonuke came over and whispered the message in tandem with the wind, ruffling along, as it had always

been done. He was massively tall, dark and build like a wall with rippling muscles over open spaces of his brown tunic.

He suddenly checked himself as he noted that Okeyo wasn't paying attention. The later stepped out drunkenly.

"What's wrong Okeyo?"

Okeyo's mind groped in the darkness, the echo of the intruder's words rippling through the dark pool of his mind, searching for the familiar traces in ceaseless rings. He should have meant the clansmen the most recent two raids. Oh no, three days ago they...

"Basi. Basi," he muttered and shook his head to support his answer. "Basi?" Bonuke lifted his eyebrows and his laughter came out in bursts of body wracking chuckles that were akin to snorts of an enraged bull.

This sturdily built man appeared always in a rage. He bubbled from one temper to another over everything; from a litter of bumbling bees to the nagging of his two wives. Even about his common randy escapades with village women who fancied him. He had a unique voice that squeaked out of his mouth so effeminately you were taken aback. How would such enormous quantity of body and build misfire with such a voice?

Okeyo slowly realized the answer could have been wrong as he saw his older cousin, a mentor, six years older drop his jaws open before he led out another burst of laughter. Almost immediately a flash of a golden smile snuggled to the core of his mind, braided hair

and milk-white teeth registered. The act filled every part of his body with a fresh wave of energy.

"Let them dare come and I'll teach them our people's ceremonies."

Bonuke shook his head and said, "Brother, the night is long and its walkers are many."

He placed his arm on his younger kin's shoulder and patted him. He examined him momentarily and saw a real change take over him.

"Check on the group to the right as I go left. I've to retire for the night and leave everything in your hands." The later knew a married man had other marriage obligations to attend to and wouldn't even bring himself to questioning him who of his wives he would visit.

In a distance, the spectacular Emanga loomed into space to the north, while its southern side like a chunk of sliced *ugali*, hard porridge, dipping into a cliff where a water mass was building, several feet below its foot. Up the hill, smooth tall grass grew amidst rich variegated thickets of green, amidst rock ledges resembling squared human huts. Then there was the smooth section running in a circle at its centre where *engoro ya mwaga*, the hole of storms, sat like a hungry lover. Into this hole every villager, great and small, hurled gifts into its open mouth and petitioned for blessings from the great unknown that Engoro had placed here.

Occasionally, at night mysterious lights crisscrossed the crescent and singing voices penetrated to the village. Lore claimed they were voices of the ancestral spirits pronouncing their blessings upon the rich and fertile land. During circumcision seasons the spirits chorused the village initiation songs and punctuated them with ululations in sync with their jubilant village undertakings. And people said it was well, *Engoro*, the creator, and *Ndandongi*, the pure womb, and *Erioba*, the sun and sky rider, had shone their light over the land. Food, health and lineages would expand.

There were a dozen villages whose protection was replicated as in his Tibo village, with men living and moving in the shadows, watching over their cattle and people. Only across the far end of the Girango and Getutu clans, turrets and deep trenches with *chindwaki*, fortifying walls, had been fashioned to fend off the brutal *Abatumera* raiders. The new defence mechanisms apart from men were formidable security but not enough. Big and small cats prowled the forests and drank from the Gucha River in the east and Mogonga River in the south that rolled their fat ruddy contents to Nyancha, the lake, all season. *Chindwari*, plagues, *ebiku*, epidemics, and other natural vagaries forced man to flee, desert a homestead in fear of death and being wiped out. The elephant, rhino, the buffalo, the hippo, the python, also grazed quietly hating the scent of a man who was encroaching on their beautiful habitat, threatening to change it forever has he burned *chindobe*, felled trees and expanded his territories.

In the dark there were tens of men creeping in the shadows, patrolling the *Egesarate*, cattle village, enjoining the residential villages, a few kilometres away, where another team of older men and the youth stood sentry in the shadows.

An intermittent chorus of dogs bayed from the adjacent villagers, a song that was handed over in circular outbursts that missed a predictable pattern but grew into the unbroken rhythm of the night. A crane hummed, a hyena laughed like a drunk toothless old man and a cow apparently on heat made its fourscore attempt to accomplish the to and fro laps, mooing continuously.

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