

Notes from Vista, the room with a view: Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, May-June 2018

It is clear the character of some inspiration is to transfigure itself in new places. A story-in-progress that has changed its title a few times, first *HIRAETH*, then other things, and now *THE LONG DECAY* enters into this land and castle of resonant beauty as a wary innocent. It leans into spaces and shadows, eavesdropping, magnetising, finding, becoming. It is spring here and roses bloom in Civitella Ranieri, and suddenly in a story home of grief in Nairobi, where a story-man named Jonah lives, he is bending over pale yellow roses named 'Jude the Obscure' (and these droop over grim walls just as they do in the Secret Garden at Civitella Ranieri), and it is right, just what the story needed to make one sentence fragrant. In the stillness of morning, the alchemical face of the light from a castle window evokes a deep inner silence. The silence has been too long in coming, hovering at the edges, this yearned for interiority, for in this silence is clarity, a way of seeing with simplicity. That seeing is a map for a story, so that one Thursday in June, I could at last see the pathways that separate a story father's plotline from that of his story son's. *Ah!* But best of all, best of all are the companions from many worlds encountered in this Ranieri hideaway. The muses of others are here, and in this season of wonder, their lyrics, words, songs and images infuse something of their essences into a tall tale that is uncoiling to its own beat.

Excerpt from, "These Fragments" by Yvonne A. Owuor, in the *All the Good Things Around Us- An Anthology of African Short Stories.*, ed, Ivor Agyeman-Duah, 2017

11.

He asked, "Do you still want to touch my face?"

She did.

12.

They sat pressed together on the metal drum, as if it were a cosy sofa. Her feet were curled beneath her body, her head and her upper torso rested against his chest. His arms were tight around her body. He had lowered his head against her hair. The oleander-jasmine-almost-vanilla was right there. Sensation of woman-skin against muddy darkness. Scented softness. Breathing in his own homesickness. Drowsy toned, all of a sudden she says, "Theology of Nearness." Her hands still tingle. Contours of face, contours of space, the place a body occupies, she knew what she would later paint with her camera, which of his images she would seize. "A theology of nearness." She repeats.

He asks, "What's that?"

She says, "There's a new pope in the world."

Sharp, “What?”

“The other did not die. He resigned. What I wanted to say is that the new pope invokes a theology of nearness.”

He has no answer.

So she continues, “I think it means to mingle smells, inter piercing of lives.” He breathes. She says, “It’s not new.” She draws shapes in the air with her hands “Suicide bombers get it.” He listens. She turns to breathe his breathing. She must find a title for this-- something with import. Something like...*gegensein*. “Gegensein” she mouths, trying not to yawn, savouring the feeling, at last, of approaching sleep. She is receding like the tide. She is waiting for him to falter in this dark but she cannot stop herself from bestowing an upside down kiss on his mouth.

13.

She snores as a small cat might. Her mouth is open. She purrs. She half hears his question. She sleeps through the answer she should have given. *None*. He has asked, her, “How much time do I have?”

14.

He disperses his men. He tears away dreams they have pasted on him. He tells them. *This is no defeat*. He says. *The war has just ended*. It was not fear that made a youth ask, *Colonel-where-do-we-go?* It was not knowing where to go without being told. *Camouflage is an African art*. The Colonel had replied. *Enter life. Merge with it where you find it. Become life. The war has just ended*. They watch the invaders below. Slithering, awkward, sneaking sudden arrivals. Soldiers, commandos of three nations looking for them, not seeing them, never seeing them. Big men carrying guns the size of small huts. Those creatures rush as a group for a hole in the mountain. Safiya is at the entrance, a distant and still white dot. Above and beyond the green forest canopy, a whirring, black mechanised thing drones and hovers and circles looking for invisible prey and within the dense Congo Basin foliage, a man tries to salute boys and men who have followed him for far too long. A tired gesture. *This is no defeat. The war has just ended.*”

He carried out a final raid. He had no choice. A river man's ruined homestead. His nine children, his two wives. He had shown up waving his M24 sniper rifle. He had used his harsh voice, and rasped in the direction of the forest as if there were others waiting to launch themselves upon the space. When the Colonel leaves, he is wearing the second wife's dress and carrying the first wife's travel papers and her basket, which is filled with family groundnuts, and one of their eight red-headed chicken whose throat is tied to prevent its squawking. It would be comatose for a while. The river man had entered into the game. He had even permitted himself sarcasm. "Go on, pierce your ears, for the earrings. Here is lipstick...it is black-red. Like blood. Drink it." He had giggled. But he had wrapped the Colonel's old uniform and M24 to load onto his boat, and toss into deep river waters. Not to save the Colonel but to avoid questions that might come his way.

But.

They would catch the gaunt Colonel in the heart of the second town of another country. Men run countries, and men can be bought. A police roadblock. His first captors would be balaclava-clad men with guns, and voices baying in assorted European accents. He would lower the basket to let the chicken escape. He would not fight back. They stripped him off his sidearm, handcuffed and stuffed him into a small blue car. The car flew over roads, crashed through borderlands, driving over red fire ants. A black helicopter hovering like a thundercloud landed. He was hustled into it. He did not fight back. They landed in a field in the capital city where he was handed over to balaclava-clad men with African accents. The men stripped him naked. They shred his woman dress. They laughed at him. They wrapped up his body in tractor chains. They bruised his head until it bled. They tugged at his penis until he screamed. They punched his lips, these swelled, and eyes, these shut tight. He did not fight back. They shoved him into a gorilla's cage, which they lifted into the back of a mud-green lorry. They wanted him to be seen by the public who, on cue, jeered and cheered and screamed and banged at his cage and believed their world had been relieved of the devil and they had been saved. He did not fight back. But he did see her.

Safiya filmed everything. Her body was steady, poised like a dancer. Her camera pointed at him. He knew she did not expect that he would lift his bound, bleeding hands to salute her.

