

# 127.0.0.1

## THOUGHTS ON HOME



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**SPECIAL THANKS TO**

THE AWESOME FOUNDATION: NAIROBI

**A PRODUCT OF**

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# CONTENTS

Foreword • <i>Michael Onsando</i>	5
The River and The Source • <i>Gragory Nyauchi</i>	7
We Leave Our House to Go Home • <i>Sitawa Namwalie</i>	9
Mum's New Place • <i>Cornell Ngare</i>	11
Going Home • <i>Michael Onsando</i>	18
Five Meditations On Movement • <i>Renee Akitelek</i>	20

The holidays in Kenya are littered with the word "nyumbani." I've been wondering what this home means to us, and what other forms of home are open to imagination.

The best bit about running an online journal is that you get to pick the themes of the publication. Something as simple as thinking "I wonder what home means to us," can flourish into a discussion and, eventually, an entire collection of essays about home, and the essence of home, within the country.

Home is complicated.

It is one of those things that runs deep with everyone - and it shows. The work in this book moves and breathes in different ways. In ways that can only be reached looking inward. In ways that ask to be listened to - and to be heard.

Home - where the heart is.

Listen, it beats.

**MICHAEL ONSANDO**

“AT THE END OF THE DAY, IT ISN'T WHERE I  
CAME FROM. MAYBE HOME IS SOMEWHERE I'M  
GOING AND NEVER HAVE BEEN BEFORE.”

WARSAN SHIRE



# THE RIVER AND THE SOURCE

GRAGORY NYAUCHI

A Greek friend once shared with me the difference between Ancient and Modern Greek; in ancient Greek, words weren't just words - they carried weight and concepts and whole philosophies behind them.

To use the word sacrifice, for example, one had to call to mind love and pain and tragedy, and in some cases even futility. The purpose of language was twofold, to communicate and to philosophize, to state what you wanted to say and to state your point of view of the world as a whole, physical and metaphysical. Swahili does that sometimes.

*Ushago.*

It's not just the home you call home, it's not your house in the city with your family and friends. Instead, it's your real home. The one in the countryside, the one that carries gallons of your blood and kilos of your flesh.

The word carries with it a concept designed to combat the alienation and isolation that surely faced the first generation of rural-urban migrants. It told you that there was a real home waiting for you once you went and did what you had to. That first generation had children - children who grew up in the city, children who only knew the city, divorced from the culture of *ushago* and all that goes with it. Children who felt alienated and isolated there instead of here. But still they used the word *ushago*, diluting it and changing it, making it false. At least that's how I feel. I don't call it *ushago*, not in my mind at least. My *ushago* is Nairobi, and Gwasssi is where my father was born.

I visited it for the last time two years ago

It's by the lake, right by Lake Victoria. The mystical source of the great river. There are islands dotted all over. Migingo is a motor boat ride away, there are also a lot of close islands, one of which is Kiwa. There is no ferry to Kiwa. The traffic is not that demanding. Instead there is a boat that fits about thirty and rocks its way there. The boat is nothing special, wood carved to make a hollow that floats on water on the back of which is a motor that pushes it along on those occasions when the wind takes leave of its sails. You sit on these benches five apiece and wait to be taken across. At the beginning of the trip there is sound coming from everyone. The conductor demanding payment, and the people making fun of us city-goers as we cramp in and try in vain to fit. But the lake must be heard, and soon all this noise fades away, slowly, slowly, ever so slowly it ebbs like colour from cloth. A dark hue of noise becomes the white grey of quiet that is only possible near a large body of water. The silence of the wind finds your ears and that silence is one of the most beautiful songs nature can play you. A wealth of age and experience exists in that silence and as if on cue everyone sat quiet to listen and to look.

On the pancake shaped Kiwa we experienced a different lifestyle to even the rest of Gwasssi. The twenty acres had a law of its own - as such places seem to. The demarcation between marketplace and domestic zone was purely theoretical. On our way to the only bar we found housewives frying fish just outside their homes in huge pans within smelling distance of the marijuana we could whiff being smoked openly, since the police never come here. We bought fried fish at KES 5, each asked for some salt and went to sit by the shore of the lake and listen some more to that song as we enjoyed our meal

Give it enough time and Lake Victoria turns into the River Nile.

It's hard to explain the sheer size of the Nile. It's the second biggest river in the world, a life giver to two of the biggest countries in Africa - but what does this mean? It means it's huge.

I can remember the first time I saw it flowing through the streets of Cairo.

It looks like a lake is finding its way through the city; the waters have millions of little waves in an expanse that takes the space of ten highways. A map of Egypt shows cities built near the river hugging their mother, afraid to let go. The railway runs almost parallel to it since this is where everything is found, and yet it is still impossible to fathom the necessity of this river until you have an aerial view.

In Luxor, we climbed the hill that separates the Valley of the Kings from the temple of Queen Hochipsou. At the top of the hill the land before you is desert and sand. Deserts are bright, the sun bleaches the sand leeching it of all colour so that the assault on your eyes is now twofold, the blaze on top and its reflection below. Suddenly, the desert stops and before you there is lush green, plants and plantations - the power of irrigation. A kilometre passes and there is the Nile, another kilometre, the desert. There is no preparation for the change in colour from white to green and back to white, it just happens. Immediately it's green, the Nile, green, immediately it's white.

The night before, we had taken a Nile boat known as a *faluka* to the other side of Luxor on the promise of a good shisha place. We piled into the boat and the quiet of the water piled into us. I looked out over the water to the millions of little waves frolicking. Calm waters seem to have more waves than turbulent ones. There is no huge show of strength, the kind that takes swimmers back to the shore instead there are millions of little ripples like creases on a cheaply laundered suit. They speak of untold power. A certain wiry strength you find in people who have grown up farming. The Nile tells you of strength and of history. A river that gave rise to Pharaohs and pyramids, to an elaborate 731-god religion, an almost indecipherable language and temples as colossal as the debt Egypt owes this river. Yet it doesn't shout out its significance, it doesn't spend its time trying to make you understand its importance. Its lack of assumption is enough.

We got to the other side as the stars sank into complacence, content to



twinkle in place till sunrise. We sat down and ordered our shisha. One thing most people will be surprised about when they go to Luxor is the prevalence of hashish. It's everywhere in every offer as if it's all tourists do, *hashisha* [my own term] is also quite common.

Our eclectic group of travellers sat down and got to talking. Pretty soon the conversation turned to the dangers of the Nile, more specifically crocodiles, which in turn led to reminiscences of home.

"...actually my brother killed a crocodile in the Amazon. He just went up to it and cut off its head, they're very lazy after they have been eating and you can just walk up to it and cut off its head. Thwack!" said the Brazilian.

"My father killed a guinea pig by mistake once." Briton.

"Is this really the time to bring up a dead guinea pig?" Greek.

One thing that happens to many people when they are away from home is that they start to remember it. They conjure up in their heads and in their dreams things about this place that are too bright to be real. If they miss it, they miss it with such passion as you would think they have been expelled from paradise. If they are glad to be away from it, they seem to have escaped a torture chamber. The feelings for this place threaten to eclipse its reality and you find people hunting all over a city for a taste of *ugali*.

At the same time though, this moment on the Nile, this moment too felt just the way home should. It was comfortable and perfect in itself, a small sliver of my life that just felt right. I wouldn't say that the Nile was my home but this moment on it was a home for me. We enjoyed it but it was peppered with longing for the places we had come from. Thinking about that night I can't help but feel a longing for it too.

This is what home means to some people, it's not just a place but a time in

a place. It's not just this time but the fact that it's past or in the future. Longing and desire are the walls and the roof of home. It's not really home unless you've lost it or you are working towards it. This is not true for everybody, but at times I feel it is true for me. Home in the strongest sense of the word is an expression of things I lost, home for me too is *ushago*. David Foster Wallace said it best when he wrote that our endless and impossible journey home is in fact our home.

# WE LEAVE OUR HOUSE TO GO HOME!

## SITAWA NAMWALIE

We start,  
We are told we are going home.

What?  
We are home.  
Is this not home?  
This place we live?  
This is home!  
I have climbed those trees,  
Fallen and broken my hand in that ditch,  
I have raced my brother and won on that wide green lawn,  
I have hunted tadpoles in that pool over there,  
You can't see it now; it only fills up with water when it rains.  
Is home not this?

No.

No?  
My father hands me an un-embellished, 'No'.  
My mother gives me a flat 'No'.  
On this, they speak as one.  
No.

No?

"This is just a house", they reply,  
"Not even ours!  
It is owned by the government."

Oh!

*We leave our house to go home!*

We pack our bags;  
Clothes, shoes, nivea, toy cars, dolls, books, monopoly, transistor radio.

We pack more bags;  
Sugar, tea leaves, butter, oil, maize meal, cocoa, sausages, bacon; we can still afford these things.

And 8 long loaves of Kumanina bread! Kumanina? What a rude word.  
Why is it called that?  
Does anyone know?  
No?

We leave our house to go home!

We get into my Dad's car,  
a brand new VW Beetle.  
Five young children, a mum, a dad and a cousin-maid.  
We take turns sitting on each other,

Except Dad of course,  
He has to drive.

We leave our house to go home!

Limuru!

We children speak up hopefully,  
*"Are we there yet?"*

My father laughs indulgently,  
*"Hahahaha!"*

"No."

There's that un-embellished 'No' again!

"Not yet," he says, his eyes twinkle at me through the rear view mirror,

I am perplexed.

We have never gone this far in our fun-filled-after-Church-Sunday-drives.

It can't be much further! It will be over soon!

Where are we going?

We leave our house to go home.

Kinangop!

30 more kilometres, hope returns.

It bounds back, panting, joyful like a puppy.

*"Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?"*

"There I can see it, there!"

"It's there over that hill. There!"

"No!"

No?

Mum's says, "Stop disturbing your father, let him drive."

Her voice is sharp.

There is no joke in it anymore.

No.

None.

I exhale all my hope.

How far do we have to go to get home?

*We leave our house to go home!*

We start a steep climb on a narrow road.  
Sheer cliffs rise on one side and fall down on the other.  
Up, up, up we go, through savannah, alpine forest, dry scrub land,  
wooded dry-lands, white highlands;  
Then down, down, down to an equatorial green land that belongs  
somewhere else.  
Not in this dry country Kenya.

*We leave our house to go home*

As we speed along the road,  
The trees start running,  
A eucalyptus lopes with wide steps, its head billows,  
Tall yellow Acacia's flash past us, in wild gangs, I can hear their soft  
laughter.  
Ponderous flame trees dressed in bright orange, plod along,  
But still manage to keep ahead of our car, how is that?  
The trees are sneaky, when we stop; they stop too,  
When we start moving, they start running again,  
They race us and win,  
We arrive and find ourselves in a place of many trees.

*We leave our house to go home!*

Don't think I saw the wonder of the changing landscape,  
The backdrop movie, shifting, around us,  
Leaving, arriving.  
I saw none of it.  
No.  
My mind echoes city lights.  
Nairobi is my jewel.  
I ask my father,  
"Is there light at home?"

"No!"

No?

My father laughs again, this time amused,

"Hahahaha!"

His eyes touch mine in the rear view mirror.

"Electricity does not stretch so far," he says.

No.

He is, matter-of-fact, "There is no light at home."

No?

No? My mind reels.

No disco-dancing neon light?

No hanging out at Carnivore on a hot night out?

No chilling with a hoard of hungry girls at night?

No!

No light to bathe me, wash me clean?

There is no light at home?

*We leave our house to go home!*

Eldoret.

Punctures come thick as rain!

The first is a joyous affair.

We all believe it won't happen again.

By the third puncture, we all know how to change a tyre, even my kid brother.

First, push the car off the side of the road, onto the verge;

Second, find stones!

To prevent the car from rolling away!

Third, put broken tree branches on the road! To warn other motorists!

Step four, fix the puncture.

By the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> puncture, I am worried,

Home speaks in code.

Maybe home is sending a message in its own crude way.  
It does not want us to return.  
Home speaks secret words buried in repetition.  
It sends a celestial whisper,

*No! Do not return. No! Do not return.  
There is nothing left for you here! No!*

We leave our house to go home!

Kisii,  
Kapsabet,  
Kisumu,  
Kakamega.

The tarmac road turns to dust,  
The car starts to bump, list, sigh, it slows down in protest.  
There are no roads here, no.  
Just tracks made by cattle, barely visible in the bush.

We reach a river; spanned by a bridge; made of old wooden planks and  
colonial recollections.

This river is not a memory.  
An empty long gorge, with wide banks and a bed of rocks and boulders,  
with the name 'River Something' on a sign post.  
This is the River Nzoia.  
The real thing!

Yes!

*We leave-our house-to go home.*

Mumias,  
Sivilie,  
Chebuyusi,



Navakholo,  
Nambacha,  
Namirama.

We arrive.

Grandmother ululates; a loud long, piercing sound,  
She holds her hands outstretched,  
Her body rigid in a rictus of astonishment.  
She leads a crowd, of women, children, men;  
They embrace us,  
A tangle of humanity, noise, movement, singing, dancing;  
Tears of joy lifted in celebration!

Grandmother stops singing her delight to ask,

“How is Kenya? How is Kenyatta, your president?”

I understand.

She and I come from different countries,  
She doesn't speak English, we don't share a president; no wonder she  
looks foreign.

*We leave our house to go home.*

We stand still as Grandmother prays her foreign prayer, filled with  
images of Jews, wandering about for 40 years in deserts,  
Crossing the Red Sea, which parts unexpectedly, to create a path.  
It is only God who can manage such miracles. Baba!  
Like the Israelites in Egypt escaping Pharaoh and returning to the  
Promised Land,  
He has come back, and not empty handed. Baba!  
He has gone and prospered, Baba!  
Returned. Baba, Jehova Jire!

After 10 years of wandering in the dangerous city lights, where men have  
no souls. Baba!

Where people can disappear without trace, as if consumed by wild beasts. Baba!

He has come back with children, most of whom I have never seen.

We thank you, Baba.

We thank you, Baba.

Baba! We thank you.

For you have been with him, Baba!

You have smiled on him, Baba!

He comes home with children, a car,

With a car, Baba!

Oh that my son can find the riches to buy a car...

Like the son of Manyonge,

Like the son of Makokha,

Like the son of Siganga, like my son!

And on and on and on, her prayer, sings, and shouts, hums and flows,  
rises and falls and...

Riswa! PAP!

She ends the prayer with a loud abrupt sound.

I am startled. And wiser.

I learnt a lot from that prayer.

*We are Jews from Israel!*

*We leave our house to go home.*

AND WHEN WE SPEAK WE ARE AFRAID  
OUR WORDS WILL NOT BE HEARD  
NOR WELCOMED  
BUT WHEN WE ARE SILENT WE ARE STILL AFRAID

SO IT IS BETTER TO SPEAK  
REMEMBERING  
WE WERE NEVER MEANT TO SURVIVE

AUDRE LORDE

# MUM'S NEW PLACE

CORNELL NGARE

I am an IDP. If you've lived in Kenya for any reasonable length of time, you don't need me to define that acronym. My first stop when I came into this world almost three decades ago was Nairobi. Pumwani Maternity Hospital to be exact. But I find it difficult to call this city my home.

You see, I grew up and spent a significant chunk of my childhood in Eldoret, Uasin Gishu County. My family moved to Eldoret when I was just a toddler. Thanks to my dad's job transfer decades ago, Deputy President William Ruto's backyard is where my homing thoughts fly whenever talk of home comes up in conversation.

When we talk about home, we tend to talk about “where we come from.” This implies that this is where we return at the end of the day, or the end of our lives. Even when fathers leave their homes in search of greener pastures, they will return where they came from with the fruits of their labour; and sometimes they return for the last time in a wooden box when their labour is permanently done. But I can no longer afford to harbour thoughts of Eldoret as the harbour where this ship will dock at the end of my life.

A harsh reality negates my nostalgia because I can no longer call Eldoret my home. I am an IDP. The closest I can come to visiting the house I grew up in today, is in the caresses of old photographs and the familiar fog of fading memories. I remember that dark December evening in 2007 when a young man knocked on our door and asked to speak to my mother. Unforgettable is the look of terror on my widowed mother's face when she turned from the door and slumped into the nearest seat. I recall the tremble in her lips and the quaking in my heart as she delivered the strange instructions: “We need to be out of here in the next 10 minutes.” My family left Eldoret in a rather undignified manner. It never once occurred to me that that strangers would come to our home and break

down our doors and help themselves to my favorite t-shirt and cap. I had seen it happen in movies and in the news, when rebel armies would invade villages and loot them of every scrap of food. The only time I had seen people smashing into a peaceful home and terrorizing its residents was within the confines of a 14-inch motion-picture frame. But here was my mother telling us that we had to move out, move fast and move now. I never packed anything that night, because something at the back of my mind told me it was all a bluff. I walked out of the only home I had ever known in slippers, never to return. It was days before I swallowed the reality that that confusing night would be the last time I would step into the place I had called home almost all my life; that it was the last time I would see the faded walls that hooked the portrait of my father embracing his dazzled bride.

The months that followed were rather difficult for us - that is me, my mother and my little sister. My teen sister had to switch high schools because the school she had attended until that time was in the heart of "enemy territory." It was not safe to go to school. I was in college, and the University of Nairobi campus hostels would be my primary home for many months that followed.

My mother (a widow at the time) was hit the hardest, as she fumbled to regain her footing and craft new dreams in strange towns. Over the next two years, she would try moving back to Eldoret, then relocating to Kitui, then Machakos until finally finding some firm ground here in Nairobi. My home is in Nairobi now, but even as I say that, it feels rather superficial. I don't feel like this is my home. It is not "where I come from." There are no memories attached to this place, no geographical reminders of the knees I scraped learning to ride a bike, or the river I unsuccessfully learnt to swim in. That tree on which my teenage girlfriend and I carved our names is hundreds of kilometers away, and I am sure I will never see it.

Whenever I visit my mother on a random weekend I don't feel like I am going home. "I am going to mum's place" sounds more politically correct, more honest. It is not really my home because I have never lived there. Her neighbors are not familiar and I did not grow up with their children - at least those of my age. Mum's new place is not my home.

Every time I go to Pangani, where mom now lives (which, ironically, is just a few meters from the hospital where I was born), I am forced to confront the solid possibility that Eldoret may never be my home again; that my children may never visit where their father grew up and went to school and had his first crush.

My children will also have to do with the stories I tell them of my childhood since virtually all my baby pictures were destroyed and lost when our house was looted in the post-election violence. Every time I go to my mum's place, I am tempted to punch the sky and curse the gods for dealing me such a cruel hand. But over the years, in few moments of stark clarity, I realize that what has happened to me and my family is neither that strange nor that unique. It happens, has happened and will happen to all of us at different points in life.

The truth is that we all have to leave our homes and make new homes in new territories - be it literally or figuratively. Some of us have to reject our homes and even forsake those homes, not because of external violence, but because of an internal metamorphosis that is common to every person walking on the surface of this earth. The forks on the roads of our lives often force us to abandon ideological homes that we would rather cling to forever. Every time I visit my mum's new place, I am reminded of the dozens of homes I have had to leave before, and how painful and difficult each departure was.

My mum's new place reminds me of my first crush, and how crushed I was when my infatuation went unrequited. I was in high school. I spent three years trying to get this girl's attention and trying to convince her that I was the man of her dreams - she just didn't know it yet. Eventually, I had to accept that she never felt the same way towards me, and I had to move

on. Mum's new place reminds me of this girl because I had to give up on the person I thought was "the one" for me. I had to wrest my heart from the clutches of her enchantment and persuade my mind that her heart was not my home. I had to move out and move fast, albeit three years too late.

Mum's new place reminds me of a time when it finally dawned on me that my dad was not the best or the most powerful or even the wisest man to ever walk on earth. The time when I saw him wrestle with his inadequacies and unsuccessfully try to shield me from his tears of desperation. I am reminded of how much I idolized dad, and was proud of dad, and looked up to dad, until one day when his humanity hit me at 100 kilometers per hour, leaving me reeling with the realization that my dad was sometimes a wimp and a failure... and yes, just another weak man.

Leaving this kingdom of dad was difficult. Every dream I pursued and every goal I chased was somehow tied to the assurance that dad knew best and what he said was wiser than any advice I would get from the wisest of sages. But with every passing year, the scales from my enchanted eyes fell as dad's tough exterior began to fade, and I knew I soon had to be my own man and that dad would not always be there. I had to move out and move fast, or else I would die the kind of death he did.

Mum's new place can get lonely – especially for her. She doesn't know most of her neighbors, and new friendships are hard to form in this fast-paced city, especially at her age. Speaking of age, the fact that mum is not at a point in life where she is raising her children alongside the women in her neighbourhood always makes her feel like an outcast. Many women her age are usually surrounded by an anthropological support system that has taken years, if not decades, to strengthen.

These pillars of strength may not always be her immediate neighbours, but for mum, even her distant neighbours can no longer be there because they belong to the wrong "tribe" and some of the damage that was done at our departure cannot easily be undone. You see, even my mum had to deal with the harsh reality that the women she had called friends for years

had turned their backs when she needed them most. They were a home that she had to move out of, fast.

Mum's new place reminds me of mum's old place and why it is necessary for all of us to leave the places we have learned to love and call home. We must leave home for our own good, because most homes are only temporary. In fact, all homes, including our own physical bodies, are temporary. And I am not even talking about death. All of the cells in your body get replaced every 7 to 10 years. So the body that you currently have, the one that you inhabit and most probably consider your most permanent residence, will have to be vacated every decade.

Yet the homes we most need to leave are not always the literal spaces, but the mental spaces that prove no longer healthy to remain in. Just as my family had to leave our Eldoret home for us to survive and thrive, some ideas need to be vacated because the time has come to leave. We must leave in order to live, because that's just how life is - a series of departures.

There are ideas that we hold at certain points in our lives, worldviews that grant us safety and the security that we need to pass through that particular stage in life. But a time comes when we have to grow out of those naïve notions and venture into new frontiers. A time comes when we have to find new homes because the old ones are no longer habitable. Biases and convictions that were cultured and cultivated under the roof of unquestioned authority have to one day face the world of harsh criticism and merciless reality.

A time will come, and has probably come many times for us, when we have to face the hard fact that home is not always best even though home is always first. That while some roots are necessary, they are not perpetual and someday the seed will have to break from the family tree and find new ground and form new roots.

Mum's new place reminds me of the many goodbyes I have said in my



brief time on this planet. Many were happy goodbyes, some were tense, while a few were painful and gut-wrenching. Take my second day in college, for example. I have never been to boarding school. Throughout primary and high school, I always knew that at the end of the day I would go home to a hot cup of evening tea and a warm dinner before burying myself under warm blankets - all courtesy of mum. I have fond memories of my mother waking me up with the words "Haiya, kwani hauendi shule leo?" (Aren't you going to school today?)

At the time I would panic and jump out of bed thinking that I was late. But even then, I always knew that a clean set of pressed uniform and a sumptuous breakfast were waiting for me - the uniform for me to slip into and the breakfast to slip into me. So when I reported to the university, my first morning was rather disorienting. For the first time in my life, I had to figure what what I would have for breakfast, and then get or make that breakfast. I realize now that while this was a mild inconvenience then, it was a necessary transition. A breaking away from tradition that was necessary for my own survival.

I miss Eldoret, my previous home. I really do, to deny this would be to deny a key ingredient to the person I am today. But as the years pass, I realize more and more that my nostalgia is shifting from a sense of regret to a sense of gratitude. While I am grateful for where I come from and the place I grew up, I am careful not to get stuck there. Mum's old place was just a launch-pad, not a landing pad, a place to begin but not the place to remain.

Mum's new place reminds me that we are all IDPs. Every now and then, we are all internally displaced from the persons we used to be. We are internally displeased and discomfited by the person we once thought we were. Whenever the tides of life turn, I am reminded that in those uncomfortable moments I am just a caterpillar breaking out of the cocoon that was once my home and embracing the reality that even though I was once truly made and fully designed to crawl, I was never meant to remain that way.

What I once called home would one day become uninhabitable; and the birth of me would become the death of me if I did not release my grip on what I once called home. I must say goodbye to what I call home, in order to truly feel at home again.



# GOING HOME

MICHAEL ONSANDO

*"Our bodies are our first homes.  
If we are not safe in our bodies, we are always homeless."  
- Shailja Patel*

The idea of "home" is one that I've thought about a lot. What does it mean to be at home? How does the structure of the home create/protect the people who reside within the home? I've never really felt at home anywhere. There is a certain dis ease; a not belonging, that I find in almost every space I'm in. Small things (that's my spot, don't touch that, where did you get that) remind me that I'm not home.

I'm at home in my body. Sometimes I get lost within myself. Many times I get lost within myself. Sometimes music does it, sometimes poetry. Sometimes it is life that happens it pulls me away from wherever I am and into myself.

I hate coming back from those trips.

I hate leaving home.

Kenne writes:

*Safe spaces are important for everyone. Everyone has a place where they go to for the sake of their own wellbeing. In Kenya, where violence abounds everywhere we turn, we go to these spaces for peace, to collaborate with others, to sustain ourselves. Women especially need these spaces because of the pall of patriarchal and anti-women violence – physical, mental, sexual and ideological – that informs many of the spaces meant to contribute to our freedom and self-actualisation.*

i.

You have been told to become smaller.

That the things you expect,  
no one can give.

That happiness is  
two steps  
a broken tricycle  
6 missed birthdays  
4 unwritten poems  
and a lonely tear.  
That desire is a cat  
tame on the outside  
but ferocious on the inside.  
You must keep your pussy  
in check.  
Smaller still,  
they insist.  
You have folded yourself  
to conceal,  
cover,  
hide  
(not your fault,  
this is not your fault  
they are not your fault)  
You have followed the  
rules, and now,  
you sit;  
steadily racking days into  
the past  
waiting  
to die.

Tony Mochama groped Shailja Patel.

This is what you have been waiting to hear. Already your mind is asking questions "Did it happen?" "Were you there?" "What personal vendetta do you have against Tony?" "Why didn't you stop him?" Already your mind is doing all it can to absolve Tony. If, even a small bit of the blame, can be moved onto someone else. Then, yes, let's do that. There is a shifting of focus.

I'm reminded that the second Tony said he wasn't there everybody

believed him. "How can we know" "but she says" "who is" etc. were not questions raised.

ii.

When a bullet  
ends 14 years  
of a heart's work  
why do they call it  
cardiac arrest?  
You ask yourself  
these questions.  
No one answers.  
The abyss echoes back  
"how many times,  
must you die  
before you learn?"

Kwekwe Mwandaza was murdered by the police.

In the still of the night police stormed a house and shot her, a 14 year old, point blank. According to their story she wielded a panga, ready to attack at any moment. Because if 8 men stormed your house in the middle of the night you wouldn't reach for your panga. Because 8 trained police officers couldn't contain a 14 year old with a panga.

Because, for the police, death is easier.

iii.

perhaps insisting to exist  
is part of your revolution.  
The world wants to destroy you  
but you refuse to die.  
Instead you stand  
"I am here  
I will always be here."  
They laugh  
and continue to cut grass  
"yes, you will."

I'm thinking about the continuing menace in Liz watching her rapists cut grass. The re-living that she had to go through over the next few months. I'm worried about her sitting, watching her back. I fear for her. The police were never an option though – were they? Still, people went.

“Let us stand with all victims and survivors of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Let us create a society where sexual violence is unknown and unimaginable.”

- *Shailja Patel*

iv.

Later

you try to sit  
but the scars  
on your back insist  
that you stand.  
You try to stand  
but the scars  
on your feet  
also refuse.  
So you lie,  
flat on your stomach,  
face down,  
lips parted,  
silently screaming  
into the earth.  
And then you hear the  
rumble  
22 million voices  
silently screaming  
into the earth.  
You are not alone.

I come back to who we allow to be safe at home. While the home has been romanticized as a place of solace, of comfort, I'm reminded that home has



“THE ACHE FOR HOME LIVES IN ALL OF US.  
THE SAFE PLACE WHERE WE CAN GO  
AS WE ARE AND NOT BE QUESTIONED.”

MAYA ANGELOU



# FIVE MEDITATIONS ON MOVEMENT

RENEE AKITELEK

You will call home.

One.

They will read you the poem for the census and the forecast. Aunty so and so is very well though the cyst on her eye will not go away. We heard in church that Maureen had her baby but then they took it to a different church for baptism. It was 17 degrees outside yesterday – the forest is breathing cold air – where did you put that blanket? You must bring us souvenirs – but are you eating? Don't eat anything that didn't have legs. Do you know how much mercury they put in cans? What is 'yassa'? Wear sunscreen. Eat your fruit. Brush your teeth, dentists are expensive. Did you find a husband?

Two.

There is no larger feeling than the abandonment that rests in that moment of transfer. You will resent those you leave behind for letting you go. You will linger, wait for the impulse that begs you to stay. You will create in your mind the fantasy of home every time you drop soap in the bathroom, every time you wipe your shoes on the mat, every time you meet a stranger – rest your fingers in the soft skin on the back of their hand. You will want to say 'one day I will know you like the back of my hand'. You will try to leave bits and pieces of yourself lying around – clues. Home will not find you here. Those who should make you stay will not remember your name tomorrow. You will smile creepily at shopkeepers when you buy phone credit. You will hope that they will ask you where your path split to bring you to Nouakchott – Ferkessedougou – Cotonou. Instead they will adjust the dial on their transistor radio. They will crank up the weather report or the call to prayer. You will pass definitely, quickly, out of their present into the more foggy reserves of their past. This place that has touched you will think nothing of you once you are gone.

Three.

Running out of shampoo will become your greatest personal tragedy. Every hair on your body will literally shed the memory of the place in which you are rooted. Squeezing the last of it out of the green bottle will be heartbreak in every stead.

Four.

You will lose your language. This is not okay. It will slip through the cracks of the things that are half heard and half translated. When you speak in childlike sentences, in languages that are far from your own, your tongue will start to desiccate. You will stop hearing yourself. You will be quiet and smiling, foreign in more ways than one. You will whisper the words of your national anthem to yourself – you will regret that it is the only prayer that you know in Swahili – Yoruba – Shona – Dinka. When people ask you where you're from you will no longer be vague, but you will have no way to prove it. Language is only valuable to those who can hear it.

Five.

Your body will cry for a hot meal, a hot shower, the hot pepper sauce from the *mama ntilie* on your street corner. You will want to be touched, sometimes. You will want only space, other times. You will resent your roommates for sleeping. You will resent your roommates for snoring. You will miss the smell of rain.

"PERHAPS HOME IS NOT A PLACE  
BUT SIMPLY AN IRREVOCABLE CONDITION"

JAMES BALDWIN





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