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**By The Elephant**



August 13, 2017

**SEVEN:** Post, post-election. The bursting open of the vast abyss beneath the veneer of 'nation'. The mournful gushing of blood torrents. The turbulent groans of the lost, the soundtrack of a beautiful mother's keening over her red-shirted son's still, still body, miasma of teargas from canisters flung into homes through doors and windows, (the absence of media in their role as witness). Along the edges of the crevice, in awe of ruins and a thousand anonymous bullet cartridges (all used), are the ribbon-decked many who giggle, and baptise the torrents 'streams', and the groans, 'thin gasps of the failed' (failed: those other people, disposable, unmournable, Kenya bodies, renamed 'criminals'). Moving on, yes, but remember, there are 360 degrees to choose from. There is no guarantee that our steps will converge. So...anyway...sometimes before an awful mystery that wears the face of existential dread, silence. Silence. There are destinations we reach where questions are not possible. So, again, silence. And watch. The clouds; watch them too. At some point, they might let the light in again. In the interim, to those who now must, Safari njema. And if you will, if you get there, do let me know the name of the country where you, at last, safely build your hearth. It is still winter in August here.

**ONE:** The unmournable, the disposable, and the uncountable. Those who counted differently. Those whose voices do not count for much. Now, their lives, we are told, do not count for much. Silently, we are called upon to watch. Incredulously, we apprehend their pain. Their death. Our imminent death. For three days ago, they were told not to stay home. They were told to go out and do what counts. They went. Willingly.

Being peaceful, it seems, has been reconfigured, as a first order question of the human

being

Now, the streets are an abyss. A limbo. A space of abeyance that is too treacherous. Too dangerous. But some went out after the count. Some obeyed and stayed indoors, in the supposed safety of their homes, where they heard the darkness of the night pierced by jubilant *vuvuzelas*, hushed complaints, and then gunshots.

Now, their hearts are pierced by the fear that a bullet might pierce their walls...maybe their flesh, if not their souls. As they sit in silence, they wish something could pierce 'our' conscience. But all they get is orders and snide remarks about their own criminality.

How, my sister, did the place of abode become a marker of criminality? How did the finger marked in indelible ink become so trigger-happy? Become so quick to point and judge. So eager to stand in front of pursed lips so as to stifle the tongue of the (M)other...Shhhhh. Silence!!! It is a tragedy that for some, the ballot becomes the bullet so easily. In spite of this horror, there is hope. Life is resilient. It persists. Exuberantly. Painfully. Even when it is still. Even when it is silent.

**ZERO** : Has it come to naught, all our talks of peace? Maybe it was doomed to be so from the beginning. From the very first time, we agreed to disavow our old leanings, and their world of meanings. From the time, we agreed to forget. To forge on peacefully. Deceitfully. For what we were fed as peace was indeed a program of pacification. A formation that puts people and things in their assumed proper places - homes, offices, shops, factories, booths, and then graves, cells, exile - in their proper order. Sometimes, beyond the border.

We are pacified when our peace songs negate our humanly gains as they claim to sooth or obliterate our pains

Being peaceful, it seems, has been reconfigured, as a first order question of the human being. Here, being is being as peacefulness...we become peace beings. Partakers of a first order egoism that disavows justice, love and ethics. A self-referential mode that disavows any form of experimental altruism and the whole set of things or ways of being that peaceful cohabitation is predicated on. This peaceful order conceals the violence that produces it. It justifies the violence that sustains it. It glorifies the violence that it creates and sustains.

Whither peace and peacefulness when we remember that there are 360 degrees to choose from? When many are at point zero where it is clear that peace as pacification imposes itself upon us today. That peace as pacification dwells in our fear and the desire to silence the intense *mirima* (*fury*) of the other in the name of security. In the name of peace. Yes, we are pacified, even ossified, when the quest for peace quickly mutes our sister's scream as the armoured thorax presses against her back. Against her face.

We are pacified when our peace songs negate our humanly gains as they claim to sooth or obliterate our pains. Songs that drown out our sister's involuntary sigh, that cry that escaped her lips when a bullet stung her thigh and a boot was set to her eye.

To apprehend her pain. To mourn for her and those who we are told do not count, is to refuse this pacification. This Faustian pact and its sacrificial bargain. To mourn with her is refusing to negate others. It is refusing to be counted consensually even when we disagree. It is refusing to be drawn into a faux moral calculus where we are always invited to partake of the least of all possible evils in the name of normalcy. It is refusing the false dichotomies that make us inattentive to the pain of

others.

...anyway....sometimes before an awful mystery that wears the face of existential dread, silence. Silence. There are destinations we reach where questions are not possible

So Scream!! Your voice is a refusal to participate in this sacrifice. This blood-bath that baptizes us. Sacrifices us. Sets us apart.

*"...anyway....sometimes before an awful mystery that wears the face of existential dread, silence. Silence. There are destinations we reach where questions are not possible."*

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But question we must. Even silently. We must question this peace that disavows life. This pacification that tells us that questioning perpetual peace will lead to perpetual war. We must question this false bargain that imposes itself upon us. A bargain that threatens to constitute us anew by calling up old formulas.

First silently, then virtually, and now with actual boots, batons, and bullets that I must flee. I flee if only so survive. To find a space where I, no we, can thrive.

But *if I ever get there*, know that I might not let you know the name of this country where I build my hearth. For you might follow me there...with your whispers and your habits. Our old habits and ghosts. Our old passions and affiliations. In my hearth, I want silence, maybe loneliness. Maybe stillness. I want to mourn for those who lie still.

For those who know it *is still winter in August here* and know the pains and the tragedy of what happened *Sometimes in April...elsewhere*.

*So, again, silence. And watch....*

**TWO:** Yes, I have arrived here. It is cold. It is still. It is a place devoid of certitudes and moral platitudes. But it is lonely. Silent. I yearn for the everyday laughter. For the familiar cries, confusion, hustles, and sufferings. I yearn for some place shared with others, if only for a moment. Even with a stranger. I yearn for my home before the *teargas from canisters [was] flung through doors and windows*.

Yes, I still dream of my home and its possibilities; its fragile hospitality; its banal hostilities. These that I had learnt to live with day by day with the hope of surmounting if only by counting.

If you will not join me here my friend, I will return home. Not like a thief in the night, but like a friendly visitor. Unannounced, yet pleasurable. For I still believe in you. I believe in us. In our home. Its flaws, notwithstanding. So please Speak! Please whisper. In this strange country whose name I have kept secret lest you follow me, I have tried to safely build my hearth.

As justification for his death. His is a necessary demise. A sacrifice, we are told. One that makes it possible for 'us' to return to normalcy. To return to reason. To return to *raison d'état*. To Peace, Love, and Unity...in the guise of development.

But my heart is elsewhere; it is there where *It is still winter in August*. It is there where *the*

*turbulent groans of the lost* pierced my ears.

Where the witnesses sat silently as the beautiful mother *keened over her red-shirted son's still, still body.*

It is there, where we were baptized...not once, but over and over again in blood. Our own blood. There, where brothers and sisters remained unmournable and uncountable because of how 'we' liked to count and Account. But I am returning. I am returning even if there is no guarantee that our steps will converge. I will try. For many before us have tried. Many more have cried. And many have died. So please stay. Stay at home when you can. Please walk, walk out if you must. Talk!!

Yes talk. Let your tongue exorcise our demons. Question, knowing that *sometimes before an awful mystery that wears the face of existential dread, silence [abounds]. Silence that marks those destinations where questions are not possible.*

But it is in this impossible place that we must dwell with others. With ourselves...maybe otherwise.

**EIGHT:** Like me, she returned home. She had hope and took the leap of faith. She gambled. She now kneels....

*along the edges of the crevice, in awe of ruins and a thousand anonymous bullet cartridges (all used).* She is a sign of our national game/gaming :

*"pata potea. Kura ni karata. Mla samaki na uthamaki."*

You choose. You blink, you lose. She watches the sleight of hand, the genius of counting, and the terror of slippery algorithms. The error of our everyday rhythms. Little things that seek to determine the value of her life. To undermine her strife. To subject her to their values and evaluations. To their way of counting, praying, and playing (with fire).

For some, it is Lotto and tithes; for others, the wheel of fortune and *kamari*; for her, it has always been ballots, and then bullets. A perverse Russian roulette. A rigged bet. Sometimes, its just bayonets.

Her shame runs deep and wide..... It is a shameful old problem. It is our little family secret. One that remains unspoken.

But she still went out and queued. She hoped it would be otherwise. She paid her debts and hedged her bets. She risked, knowing that we bet on anything. That we gamble with everything. Even with life. With her life. With maize and highways...with plays. Yes, this land is a casino. A small betting house. "*Mi casa, su casa*" (my house is your house), they tell their friends. "*Come here and play. Come here and prey.*" From Shanghai to Dubai, from Cancun to Quanzhou, casino capitalism has its day. This foreign game that is now our own, renders her life cheap. She is superfluous.

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*"Ballot OR bullet,"* the revolutionary of days of old told her. "*No, it is Ballot AND then Bullet*" ...she bets. She knows her causality. She knows she will be the casualty. She always gets the bullet slot. It is not an either / or game. It is a question of if/ then/ when. Here, hope of winning against the odds is fatal. So she gets the bullet over and over. Last time it was her man, now it is her son. But she is hopeful. She knows that life will change. She knows that this game will change. So, she rises again,

plays the game...hoping that one day...yes, one day... things will be otherwise. That 'we' might become otherwise. She waits. She watches. She counts. Silently...

**Eight:**As she waited, her hope turned into horror. Horrific Hope!! Her hands are up in the air. In prayer. She is a supplicant. She is pleading. She is bleeding. She hopes that her knees, now raw from kneeling, and her arms, stretched up high in the air will make her voice audible. That her prayer will save her. But her voice is noise.

Athumani and his boys swarm in. His armored convoy, his exo-skeletal thorax puffed out, his abdomen sucked in, his compound eyes seeing through walls, through holes. His antennae feeling for her, or for others like her. For all those unlike him. He hopes to crash her hope. To Horrify her. Like a locust, he arrives every five years. When it is winter in August. This is his season. But she is hopeful...*For, Mungu si Athumani. Na... Athumani si Mungu.*

She looks at Athumani's ink stained finger, it looks just like hers. She focuses on his bloody trigger finger. First fear, fury, then shame. Deep shame. For she knows this man has been elsewhere before. She knows that he has been in someone else's home. Invited. *"Your home is my home...my playing field."* He tells her.

She can smell another woman's perfume on him. She can smell someone else's blood. All mixed with pungent teargas. How, she asks herself, does this man go back to his family after breaking so many homes? After breaking so many hearts. After wreaking so many lives. After taking Carol, Msando, and Baby Pendo. Does he remember that baby he kicked when he kisses his own? Will he remember her kneeling down and pleading before him when he kneels down to pray for his mother? To his heavenly father... Shame!!

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Shame. Not only for the Athumanis in her house, but for all who gloat as they point at her wounded body. For all who condemn her son's bloated body. She is ashamed for those who have chosen to forget our history of violence. For all those who, even before they listen to her story, assume that they know her fully.

Her and her type. That they know her value and values. That they know her son's pathology; *"he does not obey. He does not pray. He loves stones, more so in this country where stones are best left unturned,"* they say.

Worse still, *"he threw a stone yesterday, he drilled a hole in two of them and put a bar between them instead of piling them on top of each other and pouring mortar between them."* He is a fool, *"he built his body instead of a house."*

He is gullible, *"he fought to build a better body politic instead of a bigger house of ones own."*

He is a criminal...*"he does not stay at home. He went out to the streets."*

He is a man-child. A crybaby... *"he has too much Skin down there. He does not respect the sanctity of private property. He does not care about his own life or treat it like his own private property."*

Unlike Athumani, he is not a man. More so in this space of capital, his existence, his resistance, is a cardinal sin. A crime. So his life is cheap. Dispensable. Disposable. Unmournable.

Her son does not say *'Me-I'* over and over again. He does not know the value of this egoistic style of accounting, so his life does not count for much. And a song of reason is sang, as the basis of peace.

As justification for his death. His is a necessary demise. A sacrifice, we are told. One that makes it possible for 'us' to return to normalcy. To return to reason. To return to *raison d'état*. To Peace, Love, and Unity...in the guise of development.

Her son was moving too fast. He spoke back against those who want to retrace and revive old footsteps...those with nostalgia for the old man's footsteps knowing full well where they already led us before. Knowing what they turned us into. Knowing how those footsteps turned us against each other. How these footsteps made the index finger supreme. How with the footsteps and index finger, we pointed each other... we judged and informed on each other. How this index finger was shaken in the air...triumphantly. Threateningly. How it judged, and then slid into the trigger and shot. How this index finger pointed and stood in front of men and women's lips and commanded their silence. Their disappearance. She is ashamed for we forget how this same index finger that points at her son's body today had rendered our little fingers useless. How the index finger's blood stain is always fighting hard to erase the little finger's indelible ink.

Point...point again. Her son's death is not a mere spectacle. It is a spectre. A symptom, and a judgment.

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Her shame runs deep and wide. She feels intense shame for those who smile from miles away assuming that these things only take place elsewhere or only took place in another time. *"What are you laughing at?...you are laughing at yourselves."* She restrains her quote. Her ire, her fire, turns into cold shame. She knows that what is happening to her has taken place elsewhere and will soon take place elsewhere. This, she knows, is not just her problem, it is 'our' problem. It is a shameful old problem. It is our little family secret. One that remains unspoken.

*" watch them too. At some point, they might let the light in again. In the interim, to those who now must... Safari njema."*

But now, it is no secret that some do not have to commit a crime, they are the crime itself. They are an existential or ontological infraction. She cries for us all. She cries for her kith and kin. For those who persist. For those who say that *"whether you kithni or ndekni" ( wiggle or shake)* they will change the way we count.

She cries for those who obey and never question. For those who pray and then prey. For those who anoint and appoint. For those who point...and then smile. For those who celebrate any type of tyranny...She cries silently. For the false professors turned false prophets. She cries for those who count.[...]7,1,0,2,8,8...She counts slowly and watches the clouds to which Athumani might dispatch her. The clouds to which he has dispatched many others and hidden many figures. She keeps counting and says;

*" watch them too. At some point, they might let the light in again. In the interim, to those who now must... Safari njema."*

**By Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor with Sam Okoth Opondo**

*The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.*

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