Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor is a story teller who lives in Nairobi. She has contributed numerous short stories to different publications worldwide. Her story about the consequences of regional civil strife, Weight of Whispers, won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2003. She has at last finalised work on her first novel, working title Red Rain. A contributor to Kwani, and a traveller, she is suddenly rabidly possessive about her country, Kenya.

Fire fighting for fools - Yvonne A. Owuor

Fire and truth have a habit of cohabiting. I am told truth sets us free.

December 2007. On television we see a young dreadlocked man howling, "It is death either way." He is carrying a tyre which he will set alight. He is crying. Real and imagined scores are being settled in spaces punctuated by flames.

Fire circles in Kisumu, Kitale, Kakamega, Nakuru, Mombasa, Nairobi. Dreams aflame.

To control fire, you know that you will smother, starve or cool it. You manage a fire by acquiring fire fighting knowledge and skills. You learn to determine what it is actually burning. And you identify the seat of the fire. You do not merely remove faulty fuses. That is the same as denying that a problem exists. You create escape and access routes. You recognise the character of fire and understand that it moves, breathes and like most living things, needs oxygen. To control this fire, you know that you will smother, starve or cool it.

But to have a chance at winning, you must go in and confront it.

Fire is an instrument of destruction/renewal. You can decide how you want to look at it. The same thing really. Both rather painful. Destruction confronts the past, ruthlessly. It eradicates everything to make way for new life. It erupts when the breathing space that allows necessary change is closed off. Something new is demanding birth, one way or another.

Cry Fire! In the same way you might shout Peace! A wonderful, powerful shout.

But remember that both are only consequences.

What is important, as you walk in to meet the flames is your answer to this question:

Have you tapped into the necessary humility you need as you meet the thing that can reduce you to ash?

To control this fire, you will smother, starve or cool it. You will also respect it.