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Echoes

Yvonne A. Owuor

Three days ago I 'exercised my democratic right' and cast my vote.

A vote is a voice, a choice to speak.

And then it was New Year 2008.

Morning Mass at Consolata Church, Westlands,

The thing that has invaded the land, this, layered and ineffable grief wafts even through this hallowed acre. Inside, the pale brown pews are half empty, the celebrant's steps down the aisle are laboured, his head lowered as are those of his yellow-robed acolytes. The chorister inadvertently starts the entrance hymn in D Minor; a note that sets the theme for the world's best requiems. New Year's mass in this church usually stresses its concrete seams with chattering congregants, many of whom turn up to hover at a church door only on the first day of a new year. Last year they formed guilty but cheerful gossiping clumps in the car park interspersed with gleeful *Happy New Year!* And *Shhh*!

The church chamber echoes emptiness. The few people stand with arms folded. I need a ritual to peel back this new year for me. I am here, arms folded. My mother who moves mountains is here. She says today is a good day to have a wrestling match with the Almighty about the future of her grandchildren in Kenya. I shuffled after her faith into the sanctuary where she suspects, in a season of ugliness, some of God's emissaries might have received insight about a transcendent path out of a fire-filled impasse.

Cadence of this morning's radio message. The global stories about us. Catch phrases: *atavistic tribal, ancient ethnic rivalries, primordial hatreds.* We have clicked into the template of others' low expectations. An ignominious international radio broadcast about us— failure is frowned on—in the background a rhythmic chant tinged with angry hopelessness: *Haki yetu! Haki yetu! Haki yetu!*

Ear worm. When a melody or phrase bounces in the head.

It should not matter.

But shame-sorrow predominates the part in the heart that should be at ease. A side activity in today's mass is 'The Sacrament of Reconciliation'. Confession is a soul-purging ritual, supposed to sometimes dissipate shame, guilt and sorrow. But to be able to do that the penitent must speak. If the penitent cannot speak, the Church might offer exorcism. But exorcism, a dangerous talent, is not on offer anywhere today.

The celebrant's voice trembles. He does not say that the national churning will stop. He did say that God is watching the cracking. That God as parent is not unmoved.

We have a sneaked into place a Father-of-the nation.

An befuddled Chairman of the Electoral Commission stumbled over a proclamation. The custodian of national law magically found himself in State House with a Bible to swear in the President even before the Chairman had completed the annointing.

The micro-swearing in event was televised. Showed the bad portions of a cabalistic ritual with associated slitheriness. Then 900 words, the thank-you-all-for-voting-me-in speech.

Behold, the Father-of-the-Nation.

They forgot to play the exit hymn, the one that starts with the line,

O God of All Creation

Ee Mungu Nguvu Yetu...

So Kenya erupts.

900 words later, the Father-of-the-nation is silent.

Two days later, Mass stumbles on. The celebrant mumbles, 'Do not be afraid.'

The father-of-the-nation is in place.

Amen.

900 words later, planes land at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. They are weighed down with the global press corps, circling marabou storks high on typical *Oh Africa schadenfreude*. Gleam in glare, organic gargoyles reeking with the lust for rich pickings.

The images:

A phalanx of armed men, citizens, harrying witnesses out of a gargantuan conference hall.

A man lies on his back on the street, arm outstretched, his mouth wide open, tears running down the side of his face.

A woman runs, goods on her head, three children on her back.

A beautiful young man, earrings in his ear wields a machete.

A woman cries, hand on head.

A grandfather sits in an open field, the remnant of a murdered family of twelve.

A child in a red t-shirt plays in the sewer, oblivious of the action of adults.

Eyes at half-lid, three tall General Service Unit men carry truncheons, dour faced waiting for the enraged public to turn up.

We have seen these faces and postures in other places. Not in our land, not in our haven and sanctuary. This brand of sickness is not our method, it happens to other people, not to us. Never to us.

This morning.

The keening memory of old national sorrows that still lurk as unsolved riddles do: J.M. Kariuki, Pio Gama Pinto, Argwings Kodhek, Tom Mboya, Robert Ouko, Justus Mbai. Ghost lives in the flickering of flames burning down Kenya's homes, shops, people, dreams. Newspaper headline. A church in which mothers and children had taken refuge in Eldoret was last night burned down by machete wielding young citizens. Now is the time for a strong voice. If a nation can raze the life of children inside a church then it is teetering. Between the shrieks and rage, silence. No 900 words.

Later.

A Stop-the-madness meeting in a room at the Serena Hotel convened by men and women who have serviced other people's wars, patched other people's rendered national fabrics with no idea they would one day have to look within. A yellow-veiled woman, her face with determination carved into it, her intense voice repeats, "Now. Now we begin." She is the Chairperson.

An Imam is among us. Before he can open his mouth another woman with wide slanted eyes, and a deep-voice, call out : *"O God of all creation, bless this our land and nation, justice be our shield and defender, may we dwell in unity, peace and liberty, plenty be found within our borders…"*

We know this prayer. Learned it with the ABC's and 123s, hands by our sides, face forward where, often the red-green-white-black flag would be fluttering. If there was a school orchestra this prayer would be preceded by three majestic drum rolls. Before that, headmistresses and headmasters would have intoned to assembled students, 'Let us now stand for our national anthem'.

Second stanza.

‘Nchi yetu ya Kenya tunayoipenda, tuwe tayari kuilinda.’

Grim transcendence pokes through in a simple messag.

The only way out of this is through. Fire-walking is a requirement of belonging. Fire-walking can hurt. It can kill. It can break stalwart hearts. It causes tears like these that have all our heads low, mucus pouring down our faces. Shame. Yes. Odd guilt. But inside these, the kernel of our homeland is warm, alive and profoundly loved.