“I was near to die....I was dead.” – Wambui Mwangi

If you’ve watched CNN in the last twenty-four hours, you will have caught this victim of the post-election violence in Kenya speaking his truth. He was near death: in fact, he had already died. I am not sure why this particular mind-bite should stand out from all the other images that I have seen on television, in the newspapers and on the streets here in Kenya, but it did. I have been wondering what he meant, that he had died, he had been dead. I’ll never know, exactly, what this poor man meant, but his words are echoing in the sore places of my entrails like the sound of a warning bell dying away, like the last notes of a sad song at sunset.

The sharp edge of the panga had come down twice on his head, he said, but most of the damage had been done to his hands, which had been hacked at repeatedly. His hands. He works with them, or used to. What is this language? To target the very part of the body that is used to create value, that is the labouring instrument, is to say to this man that you may not work. You may not do what you used to with your hands. Your hands offend me, I shall cut them off. And kill you also. This manner of speech is strangely redundant.

I was watching CNN as opposed to Kenyan television channels because I wanted to see what the world was saying about us. The world is saying that Kenyans, who had been on the brink of one of the most astonishing democratic transitions witnessed in Africa, degenerated, very conveniently for the West’s stereotypes, to a “business as usual: chaos and anarchy right on schedule” version of the African story. These broadcasts are brimming with just barely-suppressed glee at being able to say that tribal violence is tearing the East African nation of Kenya apart, long regarded as an exemplary bastion of stability in the region. We have confirmed some cherished stereotypes and validated many racists worldwide. In addition to everything else, really, those of you with young children had better start thinking about how, if we survive this, you are ever going to be able to explain what you did with your Kenya. What will you tell them?

Will you tell them: well darling, your uncle’s neighbour cut off his colleague’s hands because that colleague’s father was from a village about fifty kilometres away from where the president’s mother used to live? Will your mouth be able to form an explanation for your children, or will your words burn in your throat with the acid of futility and choke you, right there, right there in front of your child’s frightened eyes? Will the taste of shit in your mouth cleave your tongue to the roof of your mouth? We are creating a stain of corpses on our psyches, we are defiling our very future. We have leapt ahead to ambush our history. We have roped our children into a ponzi-scheme of danger and desolation.

We will have to tell these children “We were near to die...we were dead.”

Let us stop this.