

## Roland RUGERO

*Baho!*

*... Warapfunywe,  
Ntiwapfuye...*

*You've been shaken.  
You haven't been taken.*

Verse from the **Burundi** National Anthem

*Kahise gategura kazoza  
The past prepares the future*

It is November and the heavens are naked.

Ashamed, they attempt to tug a few clouds over to cover up under the merciless sun, which, with resolve, determination, and clarity, brings to light their nudity.

Naked, blue. Water blue, the color of Lake Tanganyika, that undulating plain to the West. Springs scattered across the valleys surrounding Kanya: not so long ago the water there was clear and crystalline, abundant. Now it is absent. A dry November.

Tucked in among Hariho's many hills, Kanya has bravely weathered this dry season's constant onslaught of heat, which has always tormented the region. He has to breathe. She also waits for the rain. Thirst for air and for humidity.

Kanya's hill is still draped in eucalyptus belonging to the National Forest. Countless, dense, and lofty. The sun causes dry and prickly leaves to spread. No water; the sky has become evil.

Or rather the men have become guilty of too many sins. The punishment of God: too much evil in this country.

The old woman stands at the foot of the hill. Her worn check leans on the shepherd's crook that she uses to tend the two small kids digging up weeds and stones in an effort to round out their scrawny bellies.

The sun's harshness meets her eye. She has understood that time is up.

In the past the valleys were always green, the rain's absence being offset by the song of many rivers flitting through the Hariho region.

Corn had its seasons, millet and goosegrass, the green pea as well, and wheat, and manioc. For urgent needs there was the banana tree. There was the dignified bean and its leaves, the sweet potato, perhaps even the gourd with its green hairy mesh running all along its rivulets. There were granaries stuffed to overflowing. There was enough to eat, to serve to visitors, and to offer to the passer-by. The thief in the fields was tolerated: there was enough to carry away. A family's shame involved being touched by improbable famine, when the era was mild with a benign air.

Such thoughts swirled through her head... Her husband was cheerfully haggling over his

plump pig, his goat or his cow. He kept his afternoons for refreshment, wrapped up in his long overcoat smelling of herbs and the land. After a day of hoeing he had to rest. And rest is social, just as work is.

The men had something to drink, too much, a multitude of lips and of hands to handle the straw every afternoon. To watch the banana wine dance at the bottom of a half-slit gourd was a daily ritual. How the gullets commented on the content and richness of the *intangos*, those vast clay vases, round and seductive! For that matter it was rarely said that someone was “drunk”, but rather that he was “beer-sated”. Drinking was a dinner that furnished endless afternoon arguments and evening consultations. At that time, men were certain of their future: a repetition of moments of repetition.

With several blows from her crook, the one-eyed old woman drums the kids’ hindquarters until they move forward. She has understood that the poverty of the fare that the sun offers has blinded her animals.

Queen among the sightless. Hard times!

Those days then. Where, upon completing the field work each evening, the wife immediately left to prepare the meal for her husband and children. Hearths were born among the tufts of banana plantations. There lay the Harahais’ enclosure. Running to get the water last thing. The man, *umugabo*, full of virile presence, inspired fear and desire. The master of the house was about to return.

We went to sleep very early in those places of little worry: after 8 o’clock, sometimes an hour earlier. It was necessary to curl up in protection against the piercing cold that invaded the nocturnal spaces. We spent the evening under the moonlight. After those gatherings around a cheerful fire, stories and riddles perfumed our clothing, the walls, and children’s dreams. We had much, we ate little and we went to sleep early. Hunger didn’t scare us.

Because with this people, he who runs admits his guilt. The slowness of the seasons marks life’s moments. Just as one season peacefully follows another regular and slow, predictable and calm, so life is peace, regularity, and slowness: what is new surprises, astounds, and disconcerts.

Thus we did not run with time, we knew it was near to us.

The one-eyed old woman, from her left eye, had seen her loved ones transgress this noble path. They said they had to send their children to school! Time had protected her from so serious an action. Wife of a rich and prosperous man, she didn’t want her plentiful green fields to wither for a lack of hands around hoe handles, machetes and other curved billhooks. For a lack of rolled-up sleeves! So her two sons had stayed on the hill, valliant solid remparts of the meagre family’s prosperity.

Her husband had died old, from natural causes: time had carried him off. He was a man of peace, a man of the fields, a husband and a neighbor of good memory. The noble souls last, contrary to the malicious saying that regards them as the most vulnerable.

The old one-eyed woman also had four girls, who were carried off by time: four weddings consolidated the family’s goat and bovine patrimony. Her sons had known how to look after the legacy left by their father. The mother rejoiced at this, happy and resigned. Happy with the good flow of business. Resigned that her own had to leave: would her girls be found by men of high value like their father was?

Life passed, and her left eye continued to function. During a sinister month of August, the right one had refused to make out the young woman’s path as she was walking. She had cried, calling for help, her mother rushed up slipping through the still functional slits of her eyelids some potion of artisanal liquor to her ... But the sun still would not break through the whitish membrane that veiled her pupil. The young girl had cried. A great deal! Time was unjust to her. Life dealt her this half-blindness when she was young, lovely, and well-behaved. What had she done?

Now she knew life had given her a single eye to enjoy the fruits that she had brought forth with slowness and restraint. Oh how the memory of those times was pleasant to her! Her only surprise had been the eye that had abandoned her so early. The rest occurred in peace: human and time, the cycles of life, slowness and certainty.

And then came the war of 1993: it carried everything away. Carried away, the green fruits of life promised to let things ripen in their time. Torn apart, the man in several pieces that snatched the machete, that pierced the the bullet, that ate away the poison of death, that violated the unspeakable. War dissociated time and human in the way the world was conceived in Hariho. It showed that time evolved! It stirred up the insanity of massacres. It made glory to be seen in the euphoria of violence. Then it dropped it, low, so low that it discovered in a last breath of agony that life is actually a trilogy: of human, of time and of space.

The war managed to dissociate human from space because, with a certain dread, it was discovered that man does not have space except via his history and culture. Violate those and space dilutes away, man flees to be governed by the growls of his own belly, by fear or hunger. He becomes once again the wandering beast that haunts the woods by day and night. The war had revealed the viewpoint of the Burundians, thought the old woman. The war...

It was unable to continue weaving its way through her old brain, the one-eyed. Incredibly powerful shouts burst out from the other side of the hill.

Resumption in unison, in the harsh colors of drought, heat and hunger of the surrounding hamlets.

Throughout these shouts, the muted rage of holding against the guilty one all that and other misfortunes elsewhere.

We do not grow weary: "*Fata, fata, fata, fata!*"

In unison: "Seize him, seize him, seize him!"

The entire unfolding of the cries must be heard to capture their full imperative: "Grab that bastard, that thief! Grab that dog! Grab that..."

A gust of wind whipped the loincloths that had been carefully wound around the tough body of the one-eyed old woman. The bastard who was the object of the shouts, the thief, that dog rushed by like a whirlwind. A young man that jumped over her kids. Exposed belly, unkempt hair. The dust whipped up by his is marked by his sweat's stench.

Hey! It's Nyamuragi, the mute! The old woman drove her kids behind the pursuers of the unfortunate one. The one-eyed, full of youth, pursued the mute.

## II.

*Nkunda kurya yariye igifyera kimumena amatama*  
Glutton ate the snail, that made his cheeks explode

With her left eye the one-eyed woman hastens to catch the pack of pursuers.

With the other, the bad one, she orders her thoughts. Tears escape them: hard work, sweat trickles. One elucidates reality, the other rebukes it with reason. One sees, the other sends. And the old woman's perception of it all is confused.

When the sun rested its first luminous fingers on the lands of Hariho, his neck was strained. It's true that the nights are cold in these parts. This morning he had come to rest next to this trickle of water, like a fount of mosquitoes sated with blood pumped overnight from the depths of fatigued and worry-strained veins. He was calm, satisfied with the night's images and the

mouthfuls he had swiped here and there during last night's visits.

In the end he was quite happy with himself, for his stomach was assuaged. Therein lies wisdom, he resolved. In those moments of morning peacefulness he recalled the evenings of his childhood. It was long ago, ten years at least. He had retained the odor of fresh wood, of the banana tree's humid leaves covering the fields coupled up against the hills, the bulls shouting their greatness, and the cows gazing at the sunsets' soft orange light. He recalled the passage into those childhood nights. He could narrate it, by sight.

When the sun had departed, the evening would sweep in to take the cold, biting breezes timorously crouching in the valley's depths, and catch hold of the rising smoke columns while only lightly touching the hearths preparing for the night, and then, in passing, greet the youth who were returning home with water jugs on the head. Everyone climbed back up to the hamlets perched on the hills. Slowly, intermittently, in company of good friends.

He remembered how the wind and a hint of cold commingled with the moon would enter the courtyards encircling the Harihais' hearths and attempt to play with the peaceful country's children. They slyly tickled the skins of little brats who were not in the least scared of such provocations: a short-sleeved shirt or a light sweater, coupled with shorts here, a skirt there, all safeguarded them. The children played with the elements of nature, for they were nature. *Umwana si uwumwe*, recalled the custom as well as the humans. "The child does not belong exclusively to any one person," even its father or mother. That was how the elders explained how all families were linked and how everything was but one: the community of life. Life was transferred during and by birth, it fed on nature and released its substance throughout it. *Umwana si uwumwe*. The child, that piece of human, that bud of life, belonged to none except nature. To its fellow creatures, to its cradle, earth. And it was with joy then that Hariho's children entrusted their weak bellies to the evening's cold. Trust and audacity.

His right foot is folded under his butt cheeks. His gaze is vague. On one side lies a shepherd's crook he has skilfully decorated with interlacing black lines. Sometimes his head nods gently. Those evenings.

At ten years of age, he would escape the solitude of family to go play in the neighboring households. He heard other stories. He ate other dishes. He was happy when he returned home later, around eight in the evening. Sometimes he supplemented his previous meal with a second one, prepared this time by his mother's thin fingers. Idiosyncrasy: since her youth she had refused to wear sandals. She maintained that they made her uncomfortable when she moved, that the soles of the *babouches* distanced her from the nourishing earth. Her

crevasses in her feet, black with dust, that she used to clean out every time she was getting ready to attend a party in the neighborhood.

As for his father, in accordance with his time and age, he wore an *ikoti*, often a long black jacket that he alternated with a large gray sweater that reeked of tobacco. His father spoke very little but drank much. In silence. He often used to appraise his days buried in a cloud of pungent smoke to which more was added escaping from his smooth black lips. These fluids swept across his eyes, teary and vivacious, yellowing the enamel of his teeth, once white as milk, and climbed up towards the black walls of his house. For a long time this father stayed crouched before the fire, and his son imitated him. In that family, words were rare, laughter even more so.

The memories flow peacefully with the stream's water. The other men, elsewhere, not in this noiseless abode, those other men had their fields, their cows, their goats, other hogs to yield a profit, and bottles to liquidate each evening in company. His father had known them but little. In the last months preceding his parents' "departure", his father would bury himself more and more inside his jacket. Was it fear of the cold? A sign of fragility, where the body parts have forgotten how to warm themselves? He would return home early, occupying himself with a

stubborn tracing of his fields encircling the *ruogo*, and then with the sun's return, going in quest of banana beer, returning home, and sitting beside the hearth to sip alcohol that he would never finish.

His father rarely spoke to him. He had never seen him wash that jacket. In the end the thick material had become an extension of his skin. He had come to believe that his father suffered, but, in the meditation that seemingly flooded their dwelling place, suffering was grounded in silence and so everything passed by effortlessly. His eyes still riveted to the stream, Nyamuragi had allowed a sigh to escape. Life continued.

His neck was strained towards the lapping of the Tuzi's water, a stream that timidly ran along the south side of Kanya. Nyamuragi had just washed his face, calm and serene. The reflection in the earth's sap had returned a face of light complexion, a rather short but expansive beard, very black and very thick hair standing on end, white and black eyes, and a nose that was a little too large, a little too pointed, and very human.

Nyamuragi, the mute, had spent a good quarter hour asking himself where the water came from. But he had found no response to this serious question. He was superstitious: he believed in man. And as one should not seek sense except in the comprehensible, he endeavored to come to terms with his fears of man. Man dismantles, creates, destroys. And that was visible. Here, the master of the world.

On the bank of the Tuzi, not far from the mute, women, or rather girls, converse. They have come to draw water. It is cold. Some phrases to perfume this morning will not hurt anyone, notably the birds in the distance who narrate their dreams.

“*Mahoro, Kige*” “Peace, Kige”, diminutive of Kigeme, that means “young girl”. They respond, “And peace to you!”

“You have found your aunt's chicken?”

“No, alas! And I don't understand where she possibly could have spent the night! Or maybe someone stole her?” Inconceivable that a chicken could get lost.

“Nyamuragi seems to be lost in his thoughts today!” adds Kigeme.

The one mentioned turns his hairy body towards the two conversing adolescents. In a smile. His name often bothers him. He knows what it means, but he doesn't believe he belongs to the category of mutes. Nyamuragi sees well that the sounds from the mouth come from oscillating jaws and a deftness of tongue quivering in the palate. The two parts function marvellously for him. His dental muscle structure is renowned, allowing him to serve as a bar bottle-opener in emergency situations..

He crushes solid chicken and other meats, gleefully cutting up beef and pork without distinction. His tongue is trustworthy in that great battle to which he has been summoned: he loves to eat.

Nyamuragi is often hungry and that makes his convex belly stand out, so that he barely manages to cover it with an ochre sweater. It sticks up just above a black pair of pants rolled up to the ankles, held up here by some pins and there by two multi-colored buttons. The ensemble is surrounded by a jacket that is also black with orange stripes. For all of his six feet he keeps up.

He eats much and with gusto, drinking beer as well. He rarely gets drunk and enjoys laughing at the spectacle of the others when drunk. It entertains him: they give way to drink. Eating is his weakness.

On the Tuzi, one of the young girls, her belly full with water, leaves the area. Saying, “As for me, I'm going to look for some sweet potatoes that we're going to cook for lunch. And then

this afternoon, you know my aunt is expecting guests...”

Kigeme responds, “Ah! Nshmi (diminutive of Nshimirmana, “may I thank my God”) remind your little brother to bring back the top that he took. In any case, we’ll see each other this evening. I’m staying for a little longer to wash my jumper.”

Nyamuragi does not understand he is mute! His jaw works. His tongue works. Everything produces a clear and audible sound. There are sensible words and phrases.

When he was still very little, four years old, his mother had taken him to see a family member of vast and useful understanding in order to diagnose his sickness. The verdict returned: the boy was in good health, he just simply did not want to speak! There was nothing more to say. It was all clear. He wasn’t sick, it was a masquerade, his father had grumbled that evening, before plunging his thin straw into the calabash full of *urwarwa*, banana wine.

Nyamuragi had learned too early, and at his expense, that life is made of dualities. Coming and going. Going up and coming down. Left and right. Before and behind. Crying and laughing. Working and sleeping. Getting tired and resting. Hunger and meal. Drinking, then thirst. The tree that grows and the axe that lays it low. The cow’s udder swells, the milker’s fingers empty it. The snake bites and the club that smashes its head. Giving and receiving. Here and there. Above, below. Sow and harvest. Youth that runs all over, old age that runs to its end. The fat muscle, the bare bone. Living and dying. Cries of joy, laughs of pain... No! Or at least, crying and laughing. Joy and laughter. That duality crossed his mind so much with every breath, life declined easily: there was the right to compare everything, between this and that. Take the two phases of the cycle, mix them and you got lost...pain, joy, crying, laughing... Nothing was certain any more... The circumstances, the other life, the complexity of this place... Halt! Everything’s getting mixed up! Land of men, estate of gods!

Nyamuragi had learned early the relativity of things and the infinite richness of reality. He was born an artist.

The grumbling of his belly has torn Nyamuragi from his soliloquy just now. He seeks a way to relieve it. Honestly, he doesn’t like when it cries down there, in the depths of himself...it presages some troublesome effort for his health. And hunger of course.

Nyamuragi the mute concedes he has drunk too much water this morning. That’s why this thing has returned with rage and disorder under his jacket.

It is impossible to relax around this stream: it’s a public place. But it boils in his intestines. He has to go fast! Where to do it? To rid himself of it? If only he were on the other side of the hill, nearer to his place...

His belly’s call has become more insistent. His look becomes more imploring: a place! A little one! The urgency of the need deformed the features of his face. All of a sudden he rushes towards the young Kigeme, just as she has put the ten-liter container on her head to take home.

Kigeme sees the man bearing down on her constantly, silently, alone.

Images of a young friend raped a few weeks ago suddenly appear in the young girl’s memory! She had spoken of that fixed burning look, of the folds in his forehead, of the hands that seized you without warning but with violence and desire...Her friend had told her to yell if she was assaulted.

She was 14 years old, 12 years younger than Nyamuragi. She let the container drop from her head, to struggle, ceasing compulsively her things around her, bent back, scared, a terrified, lost girl. She struggles, while all of it rushes through her head. She resists that imperious grip holding her to the stream to take her somewhere she doesn’t know...

“Ni ibiki? What is it?” she asks. She sees the mute hold himself between the legs, hears it gurgle with liveliness...

And then suddenly in that morning silence marking the struggle, the yell escapes, a strident, loud and terror-marked scream: “Mfasha! Help me!”

The mute tries to smother the screams with his palm. She has to calm down, shut up. He doesn't want anything bad, he simply wants her to show him the latrines...

Seeing his right hand in a fist and her mouth stuffed, the young girl believes she will be suffocated. The violence of these acts clouds her judgment. She knows she may soon die.

From the depth of her lungs she screams, bites the palm that is smothering her, and screams again.

For two months, the obsessive fear of rape has haunted the women of this country. They take the trouble of slipping a loincloth under the pants of the little girls who go to draw water or under the skirts of schoolgirls. The girls are required to go everywhere in groups.

In two months there have been six girls raped, two on the hill, four nearby. In two months the people of Hariho have fermented rage against an eventual rapist. Three men have been seized, taken hurriedly to the police. Suspects. Eleven days for them to see their freedom again. Two cut town to Bujumbura. But one of them stayed, and he didn't hide himself. He felt protected. Because there are still those who believe that young flesh cures AIDS...

The girl is still screaming. Nyamuragi has not managed to shut her up, in one and a half inutes of vigorous attempts. To defend herself the girl is doing everything possible to stay in the Tuzi's water. She knows that the mute will encounter more difficulties raping her there than on firm ground.

Suddenly a stone whistles above them. They are running to save Kigeme, who screams more beautifully. Nyamuragi instinctively feels that the projectile's target is his back. He abruptly pulls the girl from the stream and towards the hills' heights. The emanations from his belly flow again. Nyamuragi knows that he should save himself. He sees a dozen people coming towards him, mouths and faces bent with rage.

Running, relieving his belly, then explaining himself again! The plan is hastily established. he abandons the young girl that did not want to help him, then he runs in front of her. The coffee plants scrape his belly. The rocks fly by his hears. They throw a log that hits his sides... he stays strong. He runs. He trusts in the shepherd's calves. He isn't scared because he knows how to explain himself as soon as the first task is over. First, he must just run to hide himself to relieve himself, and then return towards his pursuers. Explain himself peacefully.

But while running he remembers...he doesn't know how to talk! How will he do it? Because as soon as he finds himself before them, he will have to be precise and quick in order to contain the people's fury. How?

No words, no reprieve: he's guilty! His silence condemns him more than his acts. He ran before from instinct. Now he runs in fear.

Nyamuragi knows that he should certainly not rely too much on his mute mimicry to explain to these gentlemen and ladies the content of the misunderstanding. Ah! If he had known that he would experience such a misfortune, he would have learned to speak! His heart is beating very fast. He sees the young girl from the stream again: she thought he was going to rape her.

The world is quite complicated, and crazy, and dangerous, says the mute Nyamuragi to himself as he flees, swearing by all the devils and all the gods in a language that he alone understands.