

FRANK NJUGI

UJANA



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Ujana



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PRAISES FOR THE UJANA

Frank Njugi positions himself as a custodian of renegades, and creates a tantric dance between the loneliness of youth, memory and history. The poet uses silky vocabulary that breaks down the walls of language, and merges the raucous worlds of love, existentialism, and the mystic. Here is a voice that booms ruefully from the shadows of a tenacious city and declares '...in a country you are either cuticle or seamlessness; & you can't be true to two...' which sets the tone for Ujana.

- *Mariam Hassan, Tanzanian Writer and Poet.*

Ujana does the necessary work of placing the reader at the exact centre of each unfolding event. A lyrical brilliance and memorable read. This is the chapbook to give the man asking for a map of your city, and trust that they will find their way - in the intricacies of the people, the places, the habits, the mannerisms, the sounds and songs, the lingo and the objects placed in each of the poems.

- *Naomi Waweru, Kenyan Writer and Poet*

'Frank Njugi has captured a zeitgeist in these nineteen astonishing poems. This is an urgent and important portrait of what it feels like to be a young artist in Kenya today.'

- *Alvin Kathembe, Kenyan Writer and Poet.*

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#1

"Kingiacho mjini si haramu"

BOHEMIAN

There is something to be said about a black man
who might make himself a bioethicist & clone

his shame to be something preserved in amber;
how his calligraphy is made the canary in the coalmine

of a facet that is to become the disfigured side
of a boy, & how he might become the pawn in the

chessboard the universe uses as an exemplar of one
falling off a Cliffside. There is something to be said

about a black man who believes that when a diamond
flaws,
it sparkles better & so he makes his skin pass for
parchments

where appraisals of fabrics to cover his loneliness are
written. There is something to be said about a black man

who knows why you have to cut roses during winter
so that come spring they bloom again.

UJANA

I

In my city, the indistinct siren songs are
our groans at being the semblances of a creative chaos,
for Nairobi is cold from the luck of contingencies.
When it's showtime, you indulge in the habitual line-
stepping
of one's own fragmented reality,
& not even the funkiness can alleviate the guilt
of this latest indignity.

II

At times, a mother transforms a son into a scratch-off,
envisions him one generational iconoclast in this urban
landscape.
But boys here have a tendency of gear-shifting
& getting swallowed by the slippery slope of recidivism,
because in a country you are either a cuticle or a
seamlessness;
& you can't be true to two.

III

When at the age of sensibilities, one is made
the patron of probes to the mysteries of life,
then a pact to make a city the embodiment
of stereotypical agreeability has already been made.
& with that only one thing remains at stake;
Ujana

**NAIROBI, NAIROBAE, NAIROBERRY: THE
FRAGMENTED REALITY OF CITY SKINS'**

after Wairimu Kagichu

I leave my novice nature as ashes
& my late grandmother's voice sings to me,
'*Utamerithitie ndatigaga kuhaada*',
for her memory has become nothing more than
a mere smoke and mirror to my writing about
a city & it's fecklessness.
She wants me to cease being a flower's softest bud,
go out there & meet my reckoning.
But the flaw of my ilk is the derangement
of not knowing the sparking of an apt procession of events,
or when to ignore the parallels.
In this place I have embraced being a misfit,
for hope at times is taken — a poison that kills one slowly.
Only in a memory of a voice am I at home.

PANCHROMATIC

*Things latch on
To my history brief as day's kept promise*
- Jakky Bankong Obi

[Question] What do you do when your essence
is
placed in garish linoleums, your body
redesigned a footnote, & in a nation
you are a powdery mildew in a stockpile of sunflowers?

[Answer] You become flaccid to the pink
clouds that
strums your brokenness to sound like soft indie
music & a class consciousness that could
pass for an abecedarian sequence of grief.

[Conclusion] When a place is fashioned to
pillage a soul of
of its evocations, that's when a body becomes
the sight of cerebral spasms that make one dance
to the reiterations of the forthcoming;
The Self-portraiting of Memories as an Aneurysm.

PORTRAIT OF THE LONE TRAVELLER

after Mathew Daniel

In this city the devil wears mascara in the small hours.
You pledge allegiance to her who talks with a scintilla
on riddles about you wrapped in intricate enigmas
& also lies of your non-existent chimera,
a mirage in the sand on a pilgrimage of the spirit.

In the morning before your bus leaves
she asks if her tears can make an ocean
to drown herself in one quicksilver dream,
to forget of her son: a will-o'-the-wisp that disappeared in
a flick.

But you tell of limericks from bards you have heard on your
way,
on nebulous concepts for healing disguised as rumours.

& when you are long gone
they retell in small whispers
of a lone man who speaks the language of the gods
& showed a possible metamorphosis;
if he ever shows up again, they will thank him
by rejecting his coin.

**OFF *River Road* A GIRL PLAYS A SAX SOLO TO
TRUNCATE THE INTRICACIES OF MY HISTORY**

& in a film, one girl wearing a bustier corset might
trip the light fandango as her Yankee stature gaff hooks
a romantic history, cartwheeling it to a place, where
the plumages of loneliness dithers around with the
buoyancy of a common loon. In this one, the
anagram for healing is her saxophonist version of
'A Whiter Shade of Pale', seen in a Vitaphone version,
with the film score in a phonograph that could pass off
for a 60's punk record player of a former lover. Through
the girl's sheet music I re-enter the rustling of yore,
& uproot the foreboding feeling of the forthcoming;
measure by measure, bar by bar.

AT LUTHULI ONE BOY HUMS THE TUNE OF JOHN BROWN'S SONG

Across a storefront, he peers at the faltering minds
in springtime, & hears low chatters of baritone voices,

from those who walk with high-handed grace. The boy
that holds a Cantaloupe, is the prelude of one stuck in

a stereotype, so he sings the hook loudly "*John Brown's
body lies a-mouldering in the grave, his soul's marching
on*"

& this might make him the tobacco ash of the starry-eyed
bigots, who grow their muscles from weightlifting gales of
hate.

When a skin is made the strident forerunner of a pillage,
then
not even the valued of trinkets are left to sing of a people's
history.

& this is why the boy sings "*Ye soldiers of Freedom, then
strike,
while strike ye may, the death blow of oppression in a
better time & way...*"

MY CITY KNOWS NO HISTORY

*/ In this place of colliding times, / No
word for it in childhood,
and unrecognizable in this dusk, /
Nairobi comes and goes. /*

(after Part II: Gray Latitudes,
after Michelle K. Angwenyi)

We kowtow to the elaborateness of memory as its hinges
beseech us.
This city understands the decorum of trysts,
the suppleness of Sandra McPherson's *'Lions'*,
& that's why in the muddy puddle, you are the splash of a
shimmer.
So, you have a seat, become the directory of a dancing
moonlight,
& let us instead grovel the simmering of your veritable
scars
for it's only a place priapic with the need for sublimation
that makes a palaver out of an occluding body,
that makes an incarnadine skin look scarlet;
& so, when a man about town leaves his penthouse
you go in and claim your own, for in this place courtesy is
clearly overrated.

NGORII KWA SANA

after Point Zero and Bethuel Muthee

My favourite Matwana tout declares “*Ngorii Kwa Sana*”
to how

in my city, the delight of daylight is in the revelation of
genealogies;

 you get to find out who is in an ephemeral stench and
who isn’t.

The ones with muffled Swahili accents are stairways to
heaven;

 lovers to make you believe in existing stardust.

The ones with a hazel pool of eyes are to drift from;

 a forbidden dialect, a heritage bequeathed, a heritage
almost lost.

With a phrase are my people para-socially in tune with,

 & a country has promptly refused to leave its
infancy.

GATANGA BENGA

In my village there is a crossroads that
monopolizes a young boy & girl to be

nothing more than ones who luxuriate in a
Kigamba & soft *Benga*. Among my kin,

the thin line between fact and conjecture
is when a body defies definition &

theirs for an ephemeral instance is made
to play out like a duel. The boy's skin clings to

the retort of his own music while the girl's
lingers to witness this outfitting of a tribe.

The two become the incision on a people's history
& from now onwards their upbeat reckoning as well.

TRANSCIENCE

A river killed a man I loved,
I love that river still
—María Meléndez

When an otter is domesticated with
the sentimentality of a feline,

that might imply the fraught sauntering
of our history as we squirm

amidst lumbar pains from carrying
the depths of a failed mortality.

So, we read Emma Lazarus,
recite with valour '*The New Colossus*',

& flaunt our bereavement as the ekphrasis of a
caustic drop whose end is a trampoline of grief;

for there is a defamiliarization in age
that deceives a body in stasis of its elitism.

#2

" Ukimpenda mtu, akakushukuru kutoka katika sakafu ya moyo wake, hata ukifa utaendelea kuishi. "

Enock Maregesi

INSOLENCE

I wear the ochre robe of ignorance & make
the asyndeton's in my poetry the phantasmal

flowers that echo; *the most beautiful*
part of a woman are her flaws. I

make my heart the tomb of an obstinacy which
is the pearl a boy's heart is downed with &

nothing stops the constant oscillation of my proclivity
to love people a mother had warned me about at her

knee. I am the state flower of an essence
that does not aspire to master the surging of one's

desires when pre-emptively in shame.

BARD SONG

At the height of loneliness, you become a
soothsayer whose singular vision proclaims,

*‘the greatest songs are made up of the unspoken-
words of love for those that smell like embers’.*

& in the past you have made vulnerability
one gentle rascal whose name you play

ungracious to; the semblance of an infectious
toxicity. Maybe because at times love

might just be meant to be a stern and distant
feeling that humans still attach meaning to,

you take your lovers to be the appearance of
impropriety & not the conceptualism hidden in

gentle trills. At the height of loneliness, you sing
of your allegiance to the credulous and mutinous.

HUBRIS

In my era of a sophomore slump, my faltering heart is confluent to the elliptical of a generic holy grail; which is to lick a skin pastry-creamed with a lover's tears —a kind of stealth coating against my need for a mannered inner beauty.

I have loved myself more when I am the flux of ill meant verbatim than when I am occasionally full of impute pensiveness.

& this is why my poetry is the ekphrasis of a mirror where a boy's face stands alongside a scarred one; some sort of mix up.

PORTRAIT OF THE VOICES IN MY HEAD AS THE ANIMAL MOUNT FOR MY LOVERS

A lover shows me a grackle for the first time, &
that's how I am taken by the gales of memory;

a mother discerning me an island, my mind becoming
the hogshhead where scars from a gone former lover

are appraised, & fowls that looked like this new sighting
were the foremost presage of grief becoming the sheath

of an astringent body. I live with a boy's memory
which tenders me like a pale calf, & screams with the

incongruousness of a Caravaggio canvas. I live with
a boy's impression, a whirling humanoid, one refashioned

to be immediate kin. So, I might make the susurrate
the substance to stuff the taxidermy of my healing

& decorate the patios of both present & future lovers.

SELF-PORTRAIT AS PLURALITY

& when romance becomes a ghat that leads me/us
into piety I/we place (my)/(our)selves in the
ledge/s of

one/a few who love/s me/us into complacency
him/them
becoming (a) renegade/s that unfolds into (an)
anachronistic/s.

This is why in *Lamu* I/we dance to the grumbling fable/s
of my/our history & loving becomes a
prerequisite of

the inconsolable (a) boy/s & his /their mirror/s
is/are the
sight of Anne Sexton & her shackling's that's why
I/we read

The Awful Rowing Toward God -every word a
multipart
that lengthens the chance(s) of our unfettering.

RESTITUTION

*So it is better to speak remembering
we were never meant to survive*

-A litany for survival , Audre Lorde

I take a photograph of my body as it performs
a requiem for a cousin whose accent makes

a cottonmouth sound like an iguana. What do
you call a skin peeled like a sardine, for loving

a fellow man, if not the reeving of a history;
if not a nautical seatback in a sea that reaves

kin of acumen. That's why the picture is a
rear-view to my autoportrait as an indemnity

of a resistance; & my pores sing to the echo
of my zeroing in towards home.

#3

“Utenzi wa ujana...”

AFRICANFUTURISM

after *Wole Talabi*

Somewhere between a prosthesis & an alternate history,
I am lost in the illusion of seabirds.

& neutrality be damned, I must choose between
the iteration of grief or its subsets.

In my land at times our pores are wineskins of old,
they carry the margins of boundless fields.

We take lovers as the mundane seen as operatic,
& boys as the blend of constructs.

But the good side of my people is how the passage of eras
is taken as the exploration of dreams & all its mystical.

for this is the land of spiritualities, a young blood is
the canvas for ethereality.

(SANAA YA USHAIRI) ARS POETICA

In the salty sea air of Mombasa,
on a house at the edge of a tangerine glove,
I question the literalism of sadness—
how a boy becomes fiend to writing the rueful,
when home is made the place
where smiles only appear for an instance
then recede gradually to become gritted teeth.

They say scars don't make a man
but I tarry mine in the language of the
unscathed; the illusions of Sebald, Tranströmer,
Derek Walcott, Arthur Rimbaud.
& my prejudice remains in how
I cover my skin with platitudes; verses.

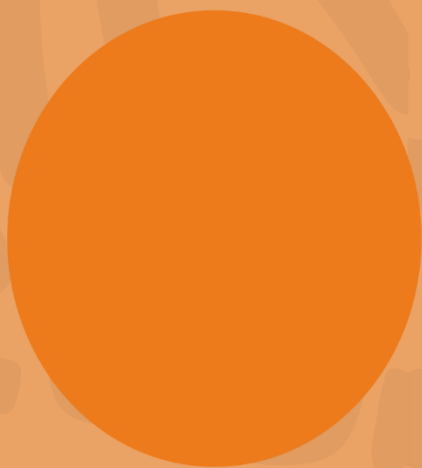
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Frank Njugi, is a self-taught Kenyan poet, writer, and critic. His accolades include a nomination for the 2023 Pushcart Prize and recognition as a runner-up in the 2023 International Literary Seminar– Fence Fellowship.

Early 2024, he was honoured with the Sevhage-Agema Founder’s Prize. Njugi is also an alumnus of the Nairobi Writing Academy, A 2024 African Writers Trust Residency Fellow, and currently serves as the East African correspondent for Afrocritik, a media outlet focused on African and Black culture. He lives in Nairobi.



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