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Mukoma Wa Ngugi

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*For my wife, Maureen Burke, and daughter,
Nyambura Eileen Wa Mukoma. Without you my
words have no music.*

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments *ix*

I. TO GIVE A WORD A NAME

Preface: Hunting Words
with My Father 3

Ancestries of Land Mines 6

Keys 9

My Two Names 10

To Our Unborn Child Whom
We Shall Name Nyambura 12

In Your Name 14

A Moment between Writing 15

An Orange 16

Pepto Bismol 17

Multiplicity and Skins 18

Safe House 19

II. SHADOWS AND LIGHT

Shadows and Light in Play 23

The Clouds Above 30

A Walk amongst Shadows
with Sandra 31

Perfect Silence Is When Each
Thing Sings Itself 32

Geysers and Hot Springs 33

Bifocals 34

New Frontiers: Wisconsin
Winter 36

I. Excerpts from an
Immigrant's Diary 37

III. WHISPERS AND TENDRILS

First Meetings 41

First Date 42

Framing Your Picture 43

Framing a Second Picture 43

Guttural Love 44

Love and Distance 45

Leper's Gold 46

Nostalgia I 47

Nostalgia II 48

A Poem Written in Silence 49

Last Frames 50

IV. REMEMBRANCES

A Poem for Arthur Nortje and
Other Lost African Poets 53

Welcoming Mortality Home 55

My Grandfather's Hands 57

Letter to My Artist Friend
Who Died Young 58

Eight Months and Two Days
Loading Trucks at UPS 60

Logotherapy 62

To My Archeologist 63

V. GIFTS OF VIOLENCE

Gifts of Violence 67

Faith 68

JailBirds 69

Fall 70

To the Driver Who Splashed
Me with Rainwater 71

Dread Locks 72

Revolt 73

Prints of Genocide 74

I Swear I See Skulls Coming 75

Kenya: A Love Letter 76

This Is What I Know 77

Epilogue: On Reading the Poem
I Should Have Written 79

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To Give a Word a Name

Preface

HUNTING WORDS WITH MY FATHER

(For my father's seventieth)

One morning I burst into my father's study and said when I grow up, I too want to hunt, I want to hunt words, and giraffes, pictures, buffalos, and books

and he, holding a pen and a cup of tea, said, *Little Father, to hunt words can be dangerous—but still, it is best to start early.* He waved his blue *bic-pen* and his office turned

into Nyandarua forest. It was morning, the mist rising from the earth like breath as rays from the sun fell hard on the ground like sharp nails. *Little Father, do you see*

him?—my father asked. No, I said. *Look again—the mist is a mirror—do you see him?* And I looked again and there was a Maasai warrior tall as the trees, spear in hand.

Shadow him, feign his movements, shadow him until his movements are your movements. Running my feet along the leaves I walked to where he was, crouched

like him so close to the earth, feet sinking deeper into the earth as if in mud, turning and reading the wind and fading into the mist till I became one with the forest.

For half a day we stayed like this—tired and hungry I was ready for home. But my father said, *I did not say this was easy—you cannot hunt words on a full stomach.*

And just as soon as he spoke there was a roar so loud
and stomping so harsh that hot underground streams broke
open like a dozen or so water pipes sending hissing,

steaming water high into the air. I turned to run
but the warrior stood his ground. As the roar
and thunder came closer, his hair braided and full of red

ochre turned into dreadlocks so long that they seemed like
roots running from the earth. When the transfiguration
was complete, before me stood a Mau Mau fighter, spear

in one hand, homemade gun in the other, eyes so red
that through the mist they looked like hot molten
cinders, the long dreadlocks a thousand thin

snakes in the wind, the leaves and grass and thorns
rushing past him. *You must help him, don't just stand
there, help him*—my father implored but just as soon

as I had closed my little hands into fists, the lion
appeared high up in the air, body stretched the whole
length as the Mau Mau fighter pulled the spear like

it was a long root from the earth. The lion, midair, tried
to stop, recoiled its talons to offer peace, but it was too
late and it let out another roar as its chest crushed

into the spear, breastplate giving way until the spear
had edged its way to the heart. Dying then dead
it continued its terrible arc and landed. I waved

and the picture stood still. My father came up to me
and asked, *Why have you stopped the hunt?* I said

“but we killed it—I have what we came for.” I pointed

to where the Mau Mau warrior was pulling his spear
from the carcass, but my father shook his head and said
—*You have done well but look closely—how can you*

carry all that in a word? How can we carry that home?
It is too heavy. I laughed and said—“Father, you help me.”
But he pointed to the ground, to a steady flow of a bright

thin red river furiously winding down from the grooves
of the spear to the earth. I too pointed, unable to speak
—the beauty larger than my imagination. I was confused.

I had no words. *Come, let us go home Little Father.*
When you are of age you shall find the words, he said.
But always be careful—to hunt a word is to hunt a life.