

Words Fail

Salawu Olajide

December 16, 2020



*Words, words, words
You failed me when I needed you the most
You vagabond!*

I
(For them at the Murambi genocide memorial site in Rwanda)

Ploughed from the mass graves of History
Exhibits on the pyre of empty testaments
Equestrians of Trauma
Signifiers of perpetual suffering
Icons of silence, of the never-speech:
To you: mangled, rancid dead on display
I owe this stupefying enchantment.

II
(For Ngugi wa Thiong'o)

Warrior of conquered tongues
Digging Babel's debris for remnants
For the sounds of the soil buried by History;
Soldier of idioms blackened by the Crusaders,
Feeble voice of fading sagas:
Tell me, chieftain of endangered tongues, how to measure
History's patois^¾
That estimation of enslaved languages.

III

That corpse lying along History's highway^¾
Rotting unmourned, unattended
Crushed beyond recognition
The disintegrating dung drawing cluttered faces^¾
Is sprouting flowers: a wonder!
Lilies mingling with wild cactuses, unbruised,
Unweeping, staring into the clouds
Daring the burnishing rays
To crush them one final time.

IV

I am a captive of my own cries
Held behind the bars of choked agonies
A dead tongue from subglottic stenosis
Deceased words jamming the pharynx:
To speak is to suffocate on words.

V

You plead your way into the waters
Words sputtering, drenched, drowning
Your tongue, imploring, tastes the saline waters
Overrunning your dreams of safety
As you grasp, clasp, gasp;
The waters, unhearing, unheeding, claiming you
Over and again.

VI

(For Christopher Okigbo)
When you have finished
& done up my stitches,
Wake me near the altar,
*& this poem will be finished...**

His body wasted on the altar
A pyre stretchered for the fire
Blackened by History's horror
Red patches of congealed life, embroidered:

Hands working on him

Stitching up rotten sores
Mending the loose ends of failed lines
Words, unspoken, unfinished, making their way
Into the stiff ends of a dying poem.

“He will not awake,” says she of sea-weed face
The poem never to be finished.

* From Christopher Okigbo, “Siren Limits IV.”

Chigbo Anyaduba is an assistant professor of English at the University of Winnipeg, Canada.



OLONGO
AFRICA