

# 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<sup>¾</sup>  
That estimation of enslaved languages.

### III

That corpse lying along History's highway<sup>¾</sup>  
Rotting unmourned, unattended  
Crushed beyond recognition  
The disintegrating dung drawing cluttered faces<sup>¾</sup>  
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