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## In the Drylands: Making a Living in Northern Kenya

Maximilien Guy McGrath  
*Bard College*

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In the Drylands: Making a Living on Kenya's Northern Border

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

By  
Max Callimanopulos

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Introduction

This story spans a five-year period of walking, talking, reading and riding on trucks and in cars throughout northern Kenya. It begins in 2018 when I spent a year in Kenya and ends in 2023, when I most recently visited the country. I was eighteen when I first went to the north. Now I am twenty-four and I haven't been able to shake it. This narrative is an oral history of the region, constructed through conversations with those who live there. It is also a personal history of my engagement with the north and its people.

In many ways, northern Kenya is a land unto itself, an inland empire separated from the rest of the country by geography and climate, history and culture. Its terrain is rugged and its climate is arid, in contrast to central Kenya's rolling hills and green, well-watered plains. Northern Kenya's people are traditionally pastoralists, migrating seasonally between pastures and water sources while downcountry Kenyans are predominantly agriculturalists. To a greater degree than downcountry Kenya, northern Kenya's porous borders have allowed the free movement of people to and from Somalia, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Uganda, lending the region a multiculturalism informed by the presence of Somali traders, Ethiopian nomads, South Sudanese refugees and Ugandan smugglers. During the colonial administration, the north was a closed district, governed by a handful of district commissioners but otherwise forbidden to missionaries, traders or tourists. Although it was opened up in the late 1950s, the idea persists of the place as a lawless, remote, dangerous region, a realm within Kenya's borders yet vividly different from the rest of the country. In Nairobi or on the coast, when I say that I've just come from Turkana or Marsabit County, people react with a

mixture of astonishment and trepidation, as if I had just told them I was coming from the South Pole. I remember announcing to my friend James Mumo, a farmer in southwestern Kenya, that I was going to go back up north. He shook his head. “Max, don’t go there. That place is dangerous. Those people have guns; *that place is not like Kenya.*”

Much of the writing of this book comes from conversations I had with northern Kenyans: friends that I know well, people I sat next to on buses or shared a meal with, Kenyans born and raised in northern Kenya and others who have adopted the region as their home. My curiosity about their lives and their relationships to the places they called home was rewarded with many stories. As I recorded them in my diary, I realized that these stories formed an oral history of northern Kenya, by no means comprehensive but illuminating the experiences of a diverse and surprising group of people in the north.

At times, my travels felt aimless. But a set of questions that guided me, questions that were initially broad but that became more focused as my engagement with the north deepened. Initially, I wanted to know why violence was such a problem in the north. I wanted to understand how the region was changing and how local northern Kenyans felt about development there. I was curious as to how landscape created culture and shaped people’s consciousness. I wondered if my thought processes, my way of thinking, were radically different from someone’s in northern Kenya? If so, to what extent was that attributable to our environment? Later I began to wonder about the legacy that Kenya’s colonial history had left behind in the north. How had northern Kenya’s history of marginalization hindered it? Or benefitted? What did pastoralists’ slow turn to sedentarism do to their kinship structures? And how was the Kenyan state

using infrastructural development to induct the north into its nation-building project?

What did resistance to that look like? Was there a prospect of a future in which the historic separation between the two Kenyas might no longer exist?

# Map



“Map of Kenya.” Nations Online. 2023. [https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/kenya\\_map.htm](https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/kenya_map.htm)

## Black Sand, Red Gold

I entered the gold mine headfirst. Supporting my weight on my hands, I carefully drew my legs underneath me until I was in a cramped squat. The mine was four feet tall and four feet wide and I guessed it to be sixty feet deep. Ahead of me, Poisho was rapidly wriggling away into the gloom.

Outside, I could hear children shrieking as they flung themselves into the Marun River. It was a warm, sparkling day in Marich, a small town in western Kenya. I'd arrived two days before. My friend Dalle and I had first come here on a road trip that we were doing together. Dalle is a writer from Marsabit, a town nearly three hundred miles from here on the opposite side of northern Kenya. We had gone our separate ways in Lodwar, five hours north of Marich, and he had gone back home, leaving me to keep traveling solo. After a few weeks of wandering – during which I visited the refugee camp at Kakuma, the town of Lokichogio on the South Sudanese border, and the hamlet of Lokiriama on the Ugandan border – I decided to revisit Marich. I was fascinated by the gold mining that provided employment for Poisho, his partner Evans, and hundreds of other men and women in the area.

Marich is a border town, located on the boundary between the dry flatlands to the north and the fertile, well-watered Cherangani Hills to the south. The hills – which are really mountains – rise steeply seven thousand feet above Marich, their upper slopes decorated with an emerald patchwork of farms and their summits a crenellated line of cloud-draped peaks.

I had been swimming along with the children until Poisho and his partner Evans had noticed me and called me up to their spot. I clambered up to where they were



sitting, halfway up a sixty-foot tall stretch of riverbank, and introduced myself. They were cheerful and friendly and after they finished their break to chew *khat*, the speedy leaf favored by truck drivers, construction workers and gold miners for its stimulant effects, they invited me to follow them into their mine.

‘Tunnel’ might be a better description than ‘mine;’ mine summons up images of cavernous underground spaces filled with men and expensive machinery. This was a decidedly artisanal operation. Poisho and Evans used strips of cloth tied around their knees and elbows for protection and a Nokia cell phone wrapped in a plastic bag as a flashlight. They were only the most recent miners to exploit this particular gold vein, which Poisho told me had been first identified two generations back.

As I studied the tunnel, gingerly tracing a finger over its hard-packed sand and gravel, an anxiety I assumed was familiar to all first-time mine visitors presented itself to me: What if it collapsed on us? I was suddenly aware of the pressure of hundreds and possibly thousands of tons of soil pushing down on this brave incursion into the earth with what seemed to me an eager and malicious force. What could be more fulfilling for it than to demolish the tunnel and destroy the three people foolishly inside it in a single annihilating moment?

“Poisho!” I said. “Do you ever worry that this might collapse on you?”

“Nah!” He called back. “This shit is like cement.”

He slapped the tunnel’s ceiling to prove his point and a hail of pebbles clattered down around him.

“And we put supports in for safety,” he added.

A few pieces of timber were embedded in the walls. They seemed insufficient to handle the hideous pressure I imagined they were under. I shuffled forward on my hands and knees.

There was a left turn, then a right, and then another left. The tunnel became darker and hotter the further we crawled. I followed Poisho's labored breathing and the Nokia's scanty light.

The two miners were both twenty-three years old, the same age as me. They had started working on this mine at sixteen. They began their day at eleven in the morning and finished at seven. They started at eleven because that was when the trucks carrying *khat* made their stop in Marich, having left Embu, where the plant was harvested, at two in the morning. Fueled by the stimulant, they took turns scraping away at the tunnel, gradually filling cloth sacks with dirt. Once all the sacks were full, the two miners dragged them to the surface and down to the riverbank, where they would shovel the dirt into broad tin pans and spend hours sifting through it, searching for the few flakes that would, for an instant, catch the light and flash yellow before sinking back into the turbid mixture of sand and river water.

"Evans!" Poisho shouted.

He came to a stop and pointed the Nokia at Evans, who was surrounded by five sacks of dirt. We had reached the end of the tunnel. Evans slowly folded himself over so that he was flat on his back. He grabbed a sack and pulled it between his legs and then passed it over his stomach and face to Poisho. Poisho did the same and passed it to me. It was painfully heavy. I grappled with it, momentarily unsure if I could move it at all before I found some purchase and scabbled backwards, pushing off with my legs and gaining a few feet every time I did.

“Faster, faster,” Poisho urged me. I could sense the mouth of the tunnel behind me and pulled harder.

I shuddered with relief once outside again. Everything seemed renewed, doubly bright and blessedly noisy in comparison to the tunnel’s mute darkness. Poisho and Evans emerged and laughed at me. We shouldered our sacks and tripped down the V-shaped skirt of talus that fell from the tunnel’s entrance to the river. The dirt, once poured out on a flat rock, looked unpromising. Poisho and Evans grabbed their pans and stepped into the river, as around them, dozens of miners lining both sides of the river did the same, slowly bending and letting the water wash over their pay dirt.

*What was I doing here?* The well-worn question, no longer novel, suggested itself to me yet again as I watched the two men start panning. I looked down at my body, caked in sweat and dirt from the tunnel, and the surprising fact of my presence here struck me, as it did almost every day, as odd and a little wonderful. *How did I come to be here?* I thought, hoping that this question might be more immediately answerable than the first.

It was July, 2023. Slowly, as if following the course of a river on a map back to its source, I began to trace the array of influences – some immediately apparent to me, others recessed and hidden – that had led me to this particular moment.

It was my aunt that introduced me to Kenya. My aunt is a well-traveled woman who, having decamped to Kenya for six months in 2017, invited me to spend my spring break there with her. She had a friend named Alex Hunter. He was a tall man, a third-generation white Kenyan who lived on a large ranch where he hosted American and European tourists hoping to check off elephant and rhino from their list of the Big

Five. I liked his manner and having extracted a business card from him, I began fomenting a plan spurred on by a shifty, unplaceable malaise that I was feeling as I entered my senior year of high school. *Something just isn't right*, I told myself as I biked to my large and pleasant school every morning. The little taste of Kenya that I had had that previous February had introduced a new element to my days, a restlessness and dissatisfaction that made completing the Common App seem on par with a trepanning and the (fun, friend-filled) routine of my school seem shallow and lonesome.

I wrote to Alex and asked if I could work for him on his camp in exchange for room and board. To my surprise, he agreed. I graduated high school in 2018 and flew to Kenya almost immediately afterwards. The camp was a modest, attractive place situated on a bend in the Ngare Ngiro River. It was often empty of guests, giving me the chance to first learn and then improve my Kiswahili through long debates with the staff on topics like whether Michelle Obama was secretly a man, or how time zones were determined, or whether performing cunnilingus gave men acne.

Alex ran the camp semi-successfully; when I worked for him, it had become almost painfully important to him that he sell the place and get out of the business of owning a tented safari camp. During those four months I stayed there, Alex became someone whom I saw as fulfilling several different roles in my life: Sometimes he was my buddy, my pal, a co-conspiratorial figure winking at me from across the dinner table as the conversation around us became about as weighty as an onion skin. Other times, when he invited me to watch rugby or tennis with him, he positioned himself in a role that approached fatherly. During the day, when he dispatched me to collect guests or go to town for a supply run or dig a ditch, he was my boss. Importantly, Alex put me in

touch with Stephen Cowan, a Northern Irish missionary who became my first real contact in northern Kenya.

From where I stood on the banks of the Marun, a wide expanse of the north was visible: far in the distance there was a range of low hills, a brown smudge on the horizon, and between them and myself, miles of dry scrub, a muted palette of grays and mottled greens interrupted here and there by red termite mounds punctuating the landscape like exclamation marks. Above it all, a wispy line of smoke crept up into the sky's untrammelled blue. I had realized quite early on that a large part of any affinity for Kenya I felt on that first investigative trip here stemmed from a swift and largely unconscious recognition of the landscape. The view in front of me, I reflected, bore an uncanny similarity to scenes from my childhood. It reminded me of the time – long, hot and perplexing – that I had spent in India between the ages of six and ten.

My late father was a man who my mother and I long joked would have been better off had he been born during the Golden Age of Sail. He was willfully anachronistic. He didn't have a cell phone, preferring to write letters in an ornate and flowery hand on thick card-stock paper. He was also India-obsessed – more specifically, obsessed and probably in love with a clam-shell fragment of India wedged in between the Subcontinent, its mortal enemy Pakistan, and the muddy Arabian Sea: This was the Kutch.

For four years, he contrived to bring us there for increasingly lengthy amounts of time, time funded by generous grants from Harvard's South Asian Studies Department. These long months in the Kutch are the most vivid and real memories of my childhood

that I have. It was never clear to me what my father was doing there – one year it might be researching fourteenth century gravestones, another might focus on the historical presence of Buddhists in the area – but I knew exactly what I was doing there. I was running around the mango farm that we lived on, courtesy of our wise and gentle Jain host, Mr L.D. Shah, and catching baby cobras. Or I was building a tortarium out of cinder blocks to house the lumbering, prehistoric tortoises that I found in the fields. I was sitting on the back of a bicycle as Bhavesh, a sensitive and hip young field hand, crooned Bollywood songs to the women we passed. I was contemplating an inexactly taxidermied leopard in the seaside palace of the last Maharao of Kutch as the Maharao told me how he had shot it in the garden “just outside that window and in the shrubbery” at eleven years old. There were only a few moments less full of wonder and the happy company of the Kutch’s fauna, moments usually spent thinking how much I hated the place as dysentery clawed its way through my guts or up my esophagus to announce itself in a lurid pea-green carpet of vomit upon the tiled bathroom floor.

What I realized when I first saw the north was that northern Kenya and the Kutch were, at least topographically and assumedly in terms of the amount of rainfall they received annually, near-identical. This was not a startling observation, but it brought to mind one of my father’s great, rankling, imperative injunctions: a person, he often said, needed to cultivate a love of place, Max! A love of place, he would add, gesturing expansively at the Kutchi terrain, can often be more powerful than love of a person. The definition of love of place that he provided was an *emotive and intellectual affinity for a place*, a description that to me, even at ten years old, had the whiff of smug pretension and seemed to forbid my family from doing frivolous and enjoyable things, like going to a water park or watching TV.

I didn't give a shit about love of place when I was seven years old, but now, sixteen years later and having spent large chunks of the last five years of my life in Kenya, often in places that bear a striking resemblance to those Indian landscapes of my childhood, I wonder whether he was subtly inculcating that love of place within me, readying a receptive set of landscape-sensitive neurons that would be relieved and jubilant and nostalgic whenever I touched down in a scrubby desert speckled with low hills and smelling of cows and charcoal burning.

At least this was how I felt as I stood on a rock next to the river, looking into the distance at the flatlands that ran uninterrupted to the horizon. And that was, I decided, the invisible and possibly neurochemical reason I had just crawled out of a hole in the ground with a sack of gold-bearing dirt on my shoulders and was now standing here in a pair of tattered boxers, with the mountains at my back and the whole of northern Kenya ahead of me.

Back to Marich and its gold. In 1930, Alfred Kitson, a geologist who cut his teeth identifying coal deposits in Nigeria and diamond reserves in Ghana, wrote a report detailing the potential that Kakamega – a town two hours south of Marich – had for gold mining. Encouraged by his report and the hardships of the Great Depression, prospectors flocked to the region. With a certain self-satisfaction, Kitson wrote: “The road to Kakamega now resembles a miniature ‘trail of ‘98’ without the snow. Old mining men, from ex-Klondyke pioneers to Australian backwoodsmen, are hurrying to the spot.”

The rush was short-lived. The gold was reluctant to give itself up to the extractive technology of the time and by the early 1950s, Kakamega, which had experienced a brief,

frenzied boom, had become a ghost town. I was there for a day with Dalle. It's not a ghost town anymore, but the colonial-era section of the town, built by those prospectors, had been largely abandoned. Its chief attraction is a jail-turned-museum where Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's hero of independence and first president, was imprisoned. Now a fat and lethargic viper was kept in a glass tank there and eerie dioramas containing life-sized replicas of Pokot tribespeople decayed sadly in the dark and damp of the museum's main hall.

Since Kakamega's gold rush, gold mining in Kenya has been the preserve of artisanal and small-scale miners, who numbered eight hundred thousand in 2015 and contribute some two hundred and twenty-four million dollars to the national GDP every year: an astonishing figure when one realizes that all that gold comes from mines and holes like the one Poisho and Evans exploit and represents the sum of hours and hours of difficult, dangerous labor in extremely rudimentary conditions.

As of today, Kenya lacks a large-scale commercial gold mine. But that is likely to change soon. Acacia Mining and Shanta Gold, two mining companies already well-established in East Africa, have announced the discovery of a gold reef over a thousand kilometers long and containing more than a million ounces of gold stretching across four counties in Western Kenya. The total worth of the discovery is estimated to be almost four billion pounds.

I didn't know any of this when Dalle and I first arrived in Marich. We were coming from Kakamega. The road to Marich led through the Cherangani Hills. Dalle and I were spellbound for the drive.



The hills had the feel of a newly opened frontier. It was the contrast between their scale and dense greenery and the raw, untidy industries that we saw cropping up along the road. The mountainsides were pockmarked with shallow quarries and limestone was sold on the roadside, small white rocks in big yellow buckets like popcorn at a movie theater. At Sebit, deep in the mountains, a newly built cement factory dominated a hilltop above the river, a brutal mess of silos and warehouses, gray walls and cranes. A ragged line of chai shops and eateries had sprung up opposite the road, thronged by workers in blue coveralls. In ten years, I predicted as we passed, Sebit would be a regional center choked with cars and lorries, rapidly climbing up the surrounding slopes.

In Marich we left our bags at a guesthouse and walked out to the river. Women were standing in groups at the water. We held back while we tried to assess what they were doing. Laundry day? Bathing? We saw one get up, carrying something that looked like a bowl. It dawned on us. Gold again.

We didn't know what to do – we were feverishly curious but the women were shirtless and we didn't want to intrude by going closer to them – until two boys walking home from school told us we could follow them. The gold panning women, they indicated, did not care whether we saw their breasts.

With a bubbling sort of excitement, we headed over to the nearest group and greeted them. They were busy but unfazed at our arrival. I tried not to look too intently at their pans as they sifted. It felt impolite.

Esther, a woman a few years younger than me, showed us the gold she had collected so far. She kept it in the hollow end of a chicken feather stoppered with a bit of

cloth. It was a miniscule quantity, barely visible as a few shy, dull flakes mixed in with black sand leftover from the panning process. Esther told us that she would probably make about five hundred shillings off of it, about four U.S. dollars at the current exchange rate.

We continued walking upriver. Both banks were lined with women. Gold prospectors, I thought, relishing the chance to accurately apply the phrase to something I was seeing. They used shovels to fill their pans with sand, leaving holes along the riverbank. Then they panned. It was a bit like watching a chef make an omelette. Using deft flicks of their wrists, they sent the alluvium downstream while the heavier gold flakes sank into the pan – “puddling a dish” in mining parlance. When only a little alluvium remained and the gold flakes were clearly visible, they carefully poured the mixture into a plastic bag before refilling their pans and returning to the river.

An older lady hailed us and bade us sit with her. I asked her – Margaret – how long the gold business had been going on for.

“*Zamani...*” - deep in the past, she said. “Since I was a kid...before that. It’s been here a long time.”

“Since before independence?” I asked, trying to understand just how long that might be.

“Ehh,” she assented.

Farther up the river, just before a bridge, we came across a team of surveyors. There were two Chinese men carrying iPads and dressed so as to ensure the sun had no chance of touching their skin with two Kenyans. They had set up their theodolite on a

tripod and were directing it at a point on the other side of the river. We stopped to watch them. No one paid us any attention except for their driver, who stepped forward and introduced himself as James.

“They’re gonna build a new bridge here,” James explained.

He had worked for them – the two Chinese men – for two years. He didn’t like the job.

“*Washenzi hawa*” - these guys suck, he said confidently. Clearly his bosses didn’t speak Kiswahili.

“They’re rude and use bad words; they swear all the time. *Fucking* this, *fucking* that, *shit, bitch!* Ahh. And they eat everything. They like to eat donkeys. Donkeys, dogs, snakes, rats. You wouldn’t believe it.”

“Why don’t you quit? If you don’t like them.” I asked.

“It’s good money. And all I have to do is drive.”

I wondered whether these two men were really as omnivorous as James claimed them to be. If one were to judge based on the stories told about them in northern Kenya, the Chinese treated the country as a moveable feast with donkey as the main course. Chinese citizens began coming to Kenya after President Mwai Kibaki announced the “Look East” policy in 2006, seeking Chinese loans and Chinese-built infrastructure projects as an alternative to Western investment. I had heard that line about Chinese people and their fondness for donkey meat in Kenya so many times by now that as soon as James started talking, I knew that he would have something to say about their dietary habits. It had transcended stereotype and become a myth.

There were other stories told about Chinese people. Usually, they had something to do with what I saw as two of the most immediate points of friction between cultures

meeting each other: food and sex. A Chinese man slept with a Kenyan girl and two weeks later, her hair started to fall out and her skin began peeling off. It was hard to tell whether these kinds of stories were metaphors for the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases or cautionary tales meant to assert the incompatibility of such interracial relationships. But other times, the stories were easier to understand. Just before we left the guesthouse, the owner – David, a softspoken Anglo-Eritrean man – told us that ten years ago, a group of Chinese men had taken a bulldozer to the riverbank in search of gold. They were chased away by angry locals with guns, but as a result, the river had shifted. It now flowed near the east bank, having moved some five hundred feet away from its former course.

Back at the guesthouse, I tried to make sense of what we had seen. It had a slightly surreal quality in my memory. The brief encounters and conversations that we'd had were puzzling and a little enigmatic. At the same time it felt exciting. That was the word I kept using in my diary. We had been excited by the Cherangani Hills, their rugged, neck-craning sweep. Marich was also exciting. Once we realized that there was gold to be found here, it was as if our mere proximity to a precious metal had awakened a new avidity within us. The gold was unimpressive – there were no California Gold Rush-style nuggets lying rough and pitted on the ground – but still, it was like fishing, the idea that there was a providential bounty here that could be yours with a little luck and a tremendous amount of hard work.

As I wrote, I tried to identify what seemed *bad* about the gold mining. I was conditioned by exposes of third-world cruelty in American magazines to expect misery

in what we had seen on the Marun River. For one there was the miners' gender. They were all women, doing work that could rightfully be called back-breaking. Why was this women's work? What did the men do? The physical difficulty of gold mining seemed better suited to men.

In truth, the women we had met did not seem miserable. I estimated that we had seen three generations of women on the Marun, all self-employed as gold prospectors. The eldest were probably pushing sixty and the youngest barely pre-teens. The little girls didn't do any panning, but helped their elders with lesser tasks. Months later, I came across a British report on gold mining near Marich that described many "juveniles" performing surface tasks at the gold mining sites, "...thoroughly enjoying themselves and with a definite wish and will to work." In spite of the report's irksome tone of merry, approving empire, it was an uncanny echo of the present-day scene by the Marun, where girls happily assisted their elders and screamed at us proudly to come see the gold they had collected. If any Western NGO saw those girls, they would want them to be in school. But they weren't. They were working. Maybe one day that NGO would touch down in Marich and attempt to get those girls in school. *Childhood is variable*, I wrote in my diary, unsure whether that was a good thing or a bad thing or just simply a thing.

What was clearly the most unfair and exploitative part of the gold business came at the end of the day, when the women packed up their equipment and went to sell their gold. The man who bought the gold was Peter. He operated out of a small shack not far from the river. Between six and seven in the evening, the prospectors came off the river and followed the path to his shack. Smoke leaked out of its eaves, like a witch's cottage in a fairy tale. A short, listless man named George took us there.

I looked inside. It was dark and crowded with women who looked back at me with wide eyes. In one corner Peter was sitting at a table, his face hidden from view by a large box that was fitted over the table. It looked like one of those three-sided folders that teachers used to put on our desks during standardized tests to ensure that there was no cheating. George said that it was to prevent the gold from being blown away.

I stepped inside the shack, aware that I was being stared at by everyone but Peter, who did not look up. He was weighing the gold that these women had brought to him after separating it from the alluvium, which he did using a magnet. The magnet picked up the ferrous black sand and left the precious metal behind. Peter was the first middleman the gold would encounter and really the most lowly of them, I realized. He didn't smelt the gold, a process that required a furnace and considerable know-how. He just bought it and passed the magnet over it before sending it on to Kitale, where the impure gold was processed by Indian merchants into real gold nuggets.

George said something to Peter in a soft voice. Peter muttered something back and George motioned that we should go outside; evidently Peter did not want to be disturbed. Outside, it was beginning to get dark. Savvy businesswomen had laid out spinach, maize and millet on sackcloth in front of the shack. Once the prospectors received their earnings, they would spend it right here on the night's dinner.

That was the only time I heard Peter speak. When I returned to Marich two weeks later, I tried twice more to meet him and was rebuffed both times. One time he was busy at his farm, another time I was gently told not to bother him. I left it at that. He was an elusive figure and suspicious of me – reasonably enough. I was a weird, inexplicable white stranger poking around his business and asking about gold; I was probably the last person he wanted to deal with.

It seemed that every town had their version of Peter, a local businessman through whose hands each area's gold passed before it traveled further afield. Later, Poisho told me that Peter was a cheapskate, something he could afford to be because there was no competing gold buyer in Marich.

“You'll give him gold worth five hundred shillings and he'll give you three hundred...or two hundred.” Poisho said, laughing as if this was something hilarious that happened to other people rather than a situation he had to contend with at the end of every day.

After a weekend, Dalle and I left Marich. We parted ways in Lodwar. He went home and I continued further north. By the time I returned to Marich, I had seen gold prospecting all over northwestern Kenya. Sometimes there was evidence of it, pits dotting bare hills, a head peeking out of one. More often than not, the gold was just rumored to be there. I assumed the rumors to be true. There is probably much more gold lying underfoot in northern Kenya than anyone realizes – yet.

I spent my evenings in Marich at the A1 Club, a bar named for the road it looked out on. A low stoop, shaded by tin roofing, ran across the front of the building. Inside it was dim and beaded curtains hung above the doorways. The alcohol was carefully guarded, the hard stuff behind a counter through which metal bars ran up to the ceiling and the beer in a locked fridge. There was a nice group of guys who hung out there. Bale, a quick, funny man who sold *khat* out of a cardboard box on the stoop. Octo, tall and lanky and charismatic in a calm, unflappable way, as if he wasn't sure what each day might bring but knew he could deal with it. Ian, a young conservationist, a recent

graduate with a degree in environmental studies from Kenyatta University. He had written a project proposal for the removal of *Prosopis juliflora*, an invasive tree species, from the area and while he searched for funding, supported himself by charging American students a hundred bucks a pop to ghostwrite their college essays.

They were friendly and each had a good sense of humor. Once, when I took a motorbike to the bar, the driver asked me if he could have a beer.

“Sure, go for it,” I told him.

He came back with a mug. Could he also have a juice?

“Ok, no problem,” I said.

He got his juice and sat next to me. Now could he have some *khat*?

“Yeah, get some *khat*.”

Bale had been watching us, his jaw working on a wad of *khat*, the rest of his face frozen in an expression of exaggerated suspicion.

“Where’d you find this guy?” He asked me.

“He’s from Sekerr,” I said. It was a mountain a few miles away.

“He wants a lot, huh?” He winked at me, grinning.

He wanted a lot, but so did most people in Marich. The place seemed torn between small-town complacency and the sense that it could become – or should have been – something bigger than what it was. Ironically, though, the recently tarmacked road may have consigned Marich to obscurity. On the old road, Marich was a waystation for travelers, conveniently located midway between Kitale to the south and Lodwar to the north. Now travelers could make the journey between the two towns in a single day, only stopping in Marich for tea if at all.



Ian, in particular, bemoaned the state of the place and the neglect it suffered from both county and federal governments.

“There are a lot of smart, hard-working people here,” he said. “This area has a lot to offer. But there’s no opportunity. For example, my proposal could employ a lot of people here if the county took it up. It would employ a lot of the youth for a long time. There are so many *Prosopis juliflora* trees here, it would take a long, long time to get rid of them all.” He pointed at one, a scraggly bush whose branches trailed limply on the ground. It was a nasty, tenacious tree, with an incredibly deep root system that sucked water tables dry and made it exceedingly difficult to uproot. The Kutch, in India, where I had spent part of my childhood, had also been plagued by them, brought from Mexico in a wrongheaded attempt to greenify the desert there.

Others, like Octo, disagreed with Ian. Octo – who had earned his nickname by being able to drink “like a creature of the ocean” – said, “There’s a lot of opportunities here. You can make money, you just have to work for it. If you have a bike, you can do a moto-taxi business. If you have some land, you can farm. Go to the river, you can get gold. You can collect wild vegetables and sell them in the market. You see? There’s work, if you just hustle for it.” He sat back, satisfied.

I thought about what he had said. The natural richness of the land that Dalle and I had been awestruck by on that first day here could be commodified and translated into monetary gain. There was water and the land was fertile, so you could farm. There was gold – the hardest work of all, it seemed to me, but nonetheless an industry that engaged hundreds of people in Marich and didn’t offer significant obstacles to entry. Bale sold *khat*; he’d only got into the business about a year ago after saving up some capital to buy his first two kilos and now, on a good day, he made about eight hundred

shillings. Not a lot of money, but he said it treated him well enough. A lot of young men here had motorbikes, bought with a loan from the bank that took forever to repay but at least their bikes afforded them some autonomy and a little pocket money each day. And down by the Marun's broad floodplains, people gathered *secorria*, a wild grain that went for twenty shillings per bunch in the market.

I liked Marich. It was beautiful and the people were welcoming. Additionally, that stretch of the Marun River that Dalle and I had trudged on our first day there so plainly contained many of the themes that I saw as dominant across the north: unexpected, sequestered riches; the conflict between local interests and infrastructural development; poverty amidst an abundance of natural resources; gender issues – all compressed and baldly visible along a mile-long section of riverbank. Marich, I decided, was the place I would send someone who had never been to northern Kenya and wanted a crash-course in the region.

But it was my fourth stint in five years in northern Kenya and after a week in Marich, a familiar itch, an urge to get on the back of a motorbike or cram myself into a bus, started to work on me. I could see the whole of Turkana County from the road that led to the A1 Club, 30,000 square miles of desert and mountains. It made me restless.

The guest house – a genteel, leafy place on the river that before the pandemic had been busy with university groups doing fieldwork in Marich – was looked after by David's mother, an Eritrean woman named Hadir. Pictures of her late husband, a strapping Englishman who looked a lot like Pierce Brosnan, lined the walls of the guest house's dining room. Her forehead was tattooed with the Orthodox cross, the ink deep green in her skin.

“You, then, are also Orthodox,” she said upon finding out my family was Greek.

“Yes,” I said, suddenly grateful that my late baptism in a vat of olive oil at the age of eight had bestowed upon me the holy illumination of the Greek Orthodox Church.

“My son,” she said benevolently.

Maybe Hadir could tell that I was restless, because as we ate breakfast one morning she suggested that I go to the Turkwel Dam.

“It’s very beautiful. We used to swim there with the children when they were building it...” she said, trailing off.

In Kenya I often felt extraordinarily receptive to suggestions like this. I trusted that people there recommended things to me because they had my best interests in mind – not that I necessarily knew what those were for myself, but I felt that someone like Hadir, in her widowhood and kindly manner – through the faith that she practiced devoutly and that I wore lightly but that nonetheless linked us – might actually know what was good for me.

So I collected my plates, thanked her, and went back to my room to pack.

Turkwel

No pictures were allowed of the Turkwel Dam. Several signs and an old man guarding the entrance to the dam reminded me of this. To me, the prohibition on photos seemed a little ill-considered. Online, the dam was touted as a potential tourist attraction, a place where “local and international tourists” could take boat rides across the lake and buy Pokot cultural artifacts. Yet Riting, the lakeside village nearest to the dam seemed unprepared for visitors. Rubbery mudfish, their whiskers stiff and downcast, hung from the rafters of shops. The only other tourist I saw was a well-dressed Indian man and his two companions checking in at the police post. “See you up there,” he said as he sauntered out of the post, but I didn’t see him at the dam or in Riting.

No photos. It was a shame because the dam was strikingly beautiful and I badly wanted to take pictures of it. Its smooth concrete walls united two sides of a narrow gorge. Clearly the dam was a powerful example of humankind’s mastery of engineering and our ability to dramatically reshape landscapes so that they might better serve our needs, but the dam itself managed to appear strangely organic. It reminded me of a piece of new bone or cartilage that forms after a break.

What were tourists supposed to do here? And what did the KVDA, the Kerio Valley Development Authority, the administrative body that managed the dam, expect would happen if people were to take pictures here? Did they imagine some kind of Monkey Wrench Gang, eco-terrorists intent on restoring the Turkwel River to its former course with plans informed by the pictures they had taken, planting explosives on the dam? This seemed improbable. It was an obscure dam; only the third largest in Kenya, tucked away in an isolated part of West Pokot county. Its construction was kept under wraps: Between 1986 and 1991 media access to the site was forbidden and consequently

there is little coverage from that five year period on the dam and little documentation regarding its subsequent effects on the region. The fact that the dam provoked relatively little displacement might also have something to do with the lack of writing on it.

Compared to other African dams built in the years following decolonization – Ghana’s Akosombo Dam triggered the relocation of eighty thousand people when it flooded the Volta River Basin to create Lake Volta in 1965 – the Turkwel Dam’s impact was minimal. A mere eight hundred families were resettled in Riting.

The Turkwel Dam was the first dam I had ever visited. The only way to reach it was up a road that zig-zagged precipitously across a mountainside. Before you could access that road, you had to pass through three gates and an arcane system of police checks where your ID was carefully scrutinized before you were issued a piece of paper that guaranteed your admittance to the next police check. The road and the police posts, I realized, were just constituent parts of the entire dam complex. From a viewpoint on the road, I got a sense of the whole project. There was the power station, an unassuming building that continued far below ground where the Turkwel River, diverted into an underground channel, flowed through turbines. Adjoining the power station was a section of tract housing that Spie Batignolles, the French company that was contracted to do the construction, had built to house its employees. Each house was identical, a French suburbia transplanted to northern Kenya. A swimming pool, tennis, basketball and boule courts, built by Spie Batignolles for their employee’s recreation, were faintly visible as faded blue and green rectangles. Finally, four-legged pylons loped away from the power station, their galvanized wires humming, I imagined, with the electricity they conducted.

It was eerily quiet atop the dam. There were no bird calls or engine noises, just the low sound of the wind as it passed over the dam's parapet. I leaned over the edge, looking down into the gorge, and yelled into it. I felt as if my voice was disturbing the sanctity of the place and might provoke a reaction, like a landslide, so I stopped. The silence, combined with the dam's clean contours and cement construction, brought to mind a modernist cathedral; soaring, monumental and slightly cold. I tried to imagine the place in 1985, before construction began. The river must have descended the fifteen hundred feet to the lowlands in a torrent, rushing over the boulders that dotted its now-dry concourse. It was more difficult to picture the river valley before submersion. The lake had completely erased any hint of hills or rocky spires, which were a feature of the surrounding mountains, and instead imposed its own lacustrine geography. Its shoreline was convoluted, abruptly extended by jagged promontories and deeply indented by slim coves. Even after thirty years, the land still did not seem reconciled to the lake. A bathtub ring of dead trees lay just above the water and erosion had not yet levigated the lake's rocks into sand, so that the land slipped seamlessly into the water without the benefit of a beach to mark the transition between environments. Like an aquatic mirror-world, terrestrial vegetation – acacias, thorn bushes, grass and twisted olive trees – swayed in the current.

I reached the other side of the dam, where a lookout point offered a panoramic view of the whole area. A group of men passed by and waved to me. It was hot and I regretted not bringing any water. I turned my attention back to the view.

On one side of the dam, the unruffled surface of the lake stretched to a distant shore. On the other, the lowlands were flat and sere. A single green line of trees marked the course of the Turkwel. I slowly walked back and forth across the platform, balancing

the two vistas against each other in my mind. There was a disorienting contrast observable here: a semi-arid desert versus a small and sparkling inland sea, an abundance of water versus a drought and, as I looked again at the dam, a stark contrast between power and the lack of it.

Somehow, high on one of the gorge's walls and visible from the dam, someone had graffitied "*10 Great Years of Nyayo*" and below it, "*Moi Juu.*" It was a lonesome slogan that suited the dam's unnerving hush. "*Moi Juu*" means "Moi on top," but Daniel Arap Moi, Kenya's second president, had been out of office for twenty years. *Nyayo* – Kiswahili for "footsteps" – had been his operating political philosophy, a call to continue in the footsteps of Jomo Kenyatta and ensure the stability of Kenya. Kenya's stability, Moi judged, was best maintained through an increasingly repressive and autocratic form of governance. Adept at wielding power, Moi governed Kenya through a system of patronage by which crucial allies were granted money and resources in exchange for their continued support of his regime. This system did effectively accomplish the goal of Moi's *nyayo* philosophy – Kenya pattered on in much the same direction that Jomo Kenyatta had intended it to – but it deepened ethnic rifts within the country and in 1982, when Moi amended the constitution to make Kenya a one-party state, the Kenyan air force staged an unsuccessful coup. Following that, he cracked down on dissidents and rival parties. The 1980s, the Kenyan historian Bethwell Alan Ogot has written, became the country's "decade of extreme political repression." Nyayo House, a bland skyscraper opposite Uhuru Park in Nairobi, became the place where Kenyans who had been identified as threats to Moi's regime were interrogated and tortured. The West largely ignored these abuses. It was the Cold War and Kenya was a stable western ally

even as neighboring Somalia, Ethiopia and Tanzania experimented with varying forms of socialism. So when those countries (with the exception of Tanzania) fell into civil wars, it must have seemed, to outsiders, a vindication of Moi's rule. For the rest of the 1980s and up until the fall of the USSR, millions of dollars of foreign aid and investment poured into Kenya.

It was during this decade that construction began on the Turkwel Dam. Moi – a tall, slim man whose intense, narrow eyes gave him a rather feline expression – understood well that political power becomes more compelling when it is compressed into a symbology rather than exercised through policy-making. These symbols ranged from the small and personal, like the ivory baton, or *rungu*, that Moi never appeared in public without, to widespread and popular initiatives like *nyayo* milk, a program that offered students free milk at the end of every school day.

The Turkwel Dam belongs to the category of monolithic, haughty symbols of power. It was built during a boom time for African dam building, part of a continent-wide trend of leaders literally cementing their power and assuring their legacy by embarking on massive hydropower schemes. Under Nicholas Biwott, the country's then-minister of energy, eight new dams were built in Kenya, one for each year he held that post. As a metaphor for the power of the sovereign, it's a little too on the nose. Dams are brutal projects that, on the one hand, demand an absurd hubris (let's stop a river) and on the other, a great deal of sensitivity for and understanding of local geology, hydrology, and geomorphology; in short, they necessitate a mammoth, environmentally destructive ambition coupled with a granular, near-loving assessment of a landscape. Armies of laborers build them. Once they are finished, a dam – in the most unsubtle way



possible – demonstrates the power of the state over the land within its territory. They are pharaonic projects.

The question, then, as I walked back over the dam's crest, was why had Moi and Biwott decided that this remote corner of the country needed such a demonstration of Kenyan state power? What – if anything – had happened here that necessitated the construction of the Turkwel Dam?

In 1979, the Tanzania People's Defense Force invaded Uganda, capturing Kampala in early April. Idi Amin, the despot who had ruled Uganda for the past eight years, escaped via helicopter. His soldiers abandoned their post and scattered across the country.

One of the posts they abandoned was the barracks at Moroto. Moroto is a large mountain along the Kenya-Uganda border, just sixty miles as the crow flies from the Turkwel Dam. It is home to the Matheniko subgroup of the Karamojong, a pastoralist group of cattle-herders who, along with their Ateker relatives in Kenya and South Sudan, have long had a fractious relationship with the governments of the countries they call home. During Amin's reign, some 30,000 Karamojong were killed, part of a larger campaign of ethnic persecution that ultimately left 300,000 Ugandans dead.

When Amin's soldiers abandoned their barracks at Moroto, the Matheniko raided it and made off with the store of modern small arms left behind. It is unclear exactly how many weapons they seized, but it was an event that dramatically shifted the balance of power between the Matheniko and their neighbors in eastern Uganda and western Kenya. Having been disarmed by both Uganda's colonial administration and successive post-independence governments, the Karamojong had been defenseless against raids by

better-armed ethnic groups. Now that they finally had guns, they could begin to recover the cattle-wealth they had lost over the past decade to the Turkana and Jie.

Borders mean little to pastoralists, especially those imposed by national governments, and following the Matheniko raid on the Moroto barracks, a cross-border arms trade between the Matheniko, the Turkana and the Pokot began to flourish. Consequently, the early 1980s were a violent time in West Pokot county. As revenge for Turkana raids that had penetrated deep into Pokot territory, the Pokot, armed with guns bought from the Matheniko, launched large-scale raids that became so deadly that the Kenyan Army moved in and conducted disarmament campaigns among both groups. Although they recovered very few weapons, the army's presence in the area forced an uneasy peace between the Pokot and Turkana which lasted until 1982, when the Pokot re-armed themselves and started raiding again. It was against this backdrop of persistent violence and cattle-raiding that the Turkwel Dam was built.

The Turkwel Dam reminded me of the process of fungal expansion. When a mushroom spore is released on the wind and carried to a new location, it sends out long root-like filaments called hyphae to seek out other spores and create a fungal network between them. That root system expands underground, feeding on decomposing matter and mating with other spores' hyphae until pinheads – baby mushrooms – begin to push their way out of the ground. After a few days of vigorous growth, the pinheads become proper mushrooms, ready to release spores and begin the process anew.

Over the five years it took to build the dam, a network of tarmacked roads, power lines and army posts cropped up around it, each successive layer of infrastructure strengthening this little corner of West Pokot County's connection to Nairobi and the

Kenyan state. The dam's stated goals were to provide hydropower to the national grid, open up three thousand acres of irrigated land for agriculture, and create a new tourist destination in a remote and scenic area of Kenya. Worthy aims, yet it was clear to me that the most ambitious goal the dam's architects had in mind was the transformation of the entire social and cultural landscape of West Pokot. Irrigated land and the creation of an enormous lake above the dam would induce Pokot and Turkana pastoralists to become farmers and fishermen, while a new tourist industry would distract them from ethnic warfare. The old northern Kenya, with its cattle-raids and bloodshed, shitty roads and disconnect from the rest of the country, would disappear, to be replaced with a new country, one that Kenya's Vision 2030 – the Kenyan government's "long-term development blueprint" – envisions as a "newly-industrialising, middle income country providing a high quality of life to all its citizens in a clean and secure environment."

With those reasonable words in mind and a moderate skepticism of them, I headed into Lorokon for the evening.

The army camp at Lorokon was close to the dry swimming pool. Around it, the village was spread over several acres. It was difficult to tell where the village had its center; it too had been built by Spie Batignolles as worker's quarters, most of which still seemed to be inhabited.

The army camp was surrounded by barbed wire and sandbags, but the gate was open and I walked in unaccosted. In the center of the camp there was a bar. Crates of liquor and beer were stacked high in an oblong tin rondavel. Its central position and the quantity of alcohol stored in the rondavel made it seem as if the camp had been built for the purpose of defending the booze.

However, I knew that defending Lorokon's liquor supply was not the reason for this camp's sturdy breastworks and the mounted machine guns poking out of several foxholes. On February eleventh, six months previously, bandits had ambushed a group of police officers near Kainuk, a town only about forty-five minutes away from Lorokon. Four police officers were killed. The bandits stripped them naked and made off with their uniforms and guns, setting their Land Cruisers on fire on their way out. Ten days later, bandits attacked a police post in Kainuk and were repelled only after a lengthy gun battle.

The Kenyan military announced a special operation. "The equal treatment we give to Al Shabaab, must be given to that militia group," Turkana County governor Jeremiah Lomorukai said at a press conference, sounding a little unsure as to exactly who the people deserving such retribution might be. Undaunted, the military issued a dawn-to-dusk curfew in Kainuk and began a disarmament campaign. Throughout March, April and May, a clumsy sort of peace was maintained by the military in Kainuk, with notable interruptions: On April sixth, five people were killed near Kainuk and then on April twelfth, bandits shot a woman on her way to get water.

Bandits, I thought, was an imprecise way to describe them. They were young men from Pokot and Turkana communities, well-armed and highly mobile. Conventional wisdom ascribed northern Kenya's issues with violence to drought and climate change, struggles over water and pasture; while those were important contributors to the region's insecurity, the attacks in Kainuk had a vicious, brazen edge to them that distinguished them from the usual raiding that has long been a feature of the north's social landscape. During the security operation, Kenyan officials employed a wrathful, grandiloquent tone to indicate just how seriously they were taking the banditry problem.

Three weeks into the operation, Kenya's interior cabinet secretary Kithure Kindiki revealed to the press that the operation had uncovered a web of "senior commanders, spiritual leaders, political patrons and the commercial beneficiaries" who comprised a motley mafia, offering the bandits weapons and intelligence in exchange for a share of the spoils. "In a short while," Kindiki warned reporters, "we shall be circulating the names and photographs of these dark pillars of the evil network that is banditry." No such illuminating document, unfortunately, was ever published.

As I looked over the army camp and its earthen fortifications, it occurred to me that the Turkwel Dam's spore-like presence in the area had failed – contrary to President Moi and Nicholas Biwott's hopes – to satisfactorily pacify West Pokot; as a symbol of Kenya's arrival in the county, it was an unpersuasive one, a labyrinthine piece of infrastructure carelessly thrown across half a plain and a mountainside. It was also built, I later learned, right on top of a major geological faultline.

At five o'clock, as the sun started to disappear behind the mountains, tremors were the furthest thing from anyone's mind at the camp. The place was hopping. Soldiers were playing pool in their undershirts and fatigues, cigarettes bobbing up and down on their lips as they hassled each other. Other men – and women – civilians – were sitting cramped on the benches. I bought a beer from the cool soldier who was manning the bar and stood with my back against a post. Someone offered me a pool cue, but I declined. I wasn't very good at pool, especially the kind of pool they were playing, which involved six or seven players attempting to pocket the balls in numbered order. Each player played until he missed a shot and then handed off the cue to the next player.

One man scribbled figures on a piece of paper, tallying up the points. I wandered away from them and sat with the civilians.

A man beamed at me as I sat and introduced himself as Danny. He was sitting with a man that he called his brother, and indeed there was a resemblance between them. Danny pointed at another man, who he said was also his brother, and a woman sitting next to that man, who was his sister. They raised their beers. The older man behind us, who chuckled as Danny pointed out his relatives, was Danny's cousin. And at a distant bench, two more siblings sat, sipping beer out of plastic cups. As I looked around the crowd, I realized I was surrounded by Danny's extended family. Each of them bore some resemblance to the other. It was like finding the same sample used in different songs, and it brought me the same satisfying feeling of recognition.

"Everyone here is your family," I said. "How many siblings do you have?"

"Forty," he said. It was a big number, but Danny explained that his father had married a few wives who shared the work of child-rearing, which otherwise, he noted, would have been overwhelming for one woman on her own. Each of his father's wives, he continued, was like a mother to him – no, not like a mother, but just a mother. For a moment, I felt a little wistful as I looked at Danny's sprawling, chatty family, who were now beginning to sing a song. I tried to picture my mother and some co-wives raising me, but my mind kept outfitting them in batik cloth and bangles, so I dismissed the image and returned to the conversation.

Danny had taken my hand in his and was examining it. He and his brother were tracing the lines of my palm and whispering.

"*Radi, radi*," he said happily, pointing at my palm. A bit fuzzy from the beer, it took me a moment to remember that *radi* meant lightning in Kiswahili.

“*Radi?* Where?” I looked at the sky.

“On your hand,” he said.

It was true that my palm-lines looked like lightning strikes. It had never occurred to me before. But why was it important?

“The face,” Danny elaborated, “comes from the mother, but the hands come from the father. If you want to know whether a child is yours, you should look at their hands. Ours” – and he proffered his own palm, its lines slightly deeper than mine but following the same pattern that was etched on my skin – “are the same.”

“Meaning what?” I asked.

“That we’re brothers,” he concluded, beaming again.

It was a genial way to make a stranger feel included at a bar. I heard the voice of my middle-school science teacher cheerfully reminding me, *well, we all came from Africa!*

A man was staring at me with huge eyes. He was well-dressed and sat with his hands pressed in between his knees, as if he was expecting a visit from the doctor and wasn’t sure if the news would be good or bad.

“Who’s that?” I asked Danny.

“That’s the chief,” he said. “Go and say hello to him.”

The chief beckoned me over. He was a small spry man whose age was impossible to tell accurately. I could only say that he was older. He told me to call him Chief Sifa and motioned me to sit across from him.

“Where are you from?” He said.

I described where I was from and said that I was a student traveling through Kenya who had decided to visit the Turkwel Dam. I spoke Kiswahili, I told him, because I had spent a decent amount of time in Kenya before.

“Have you seen the dam yet?” Chief Sifa asked.

I said I had and that it was very impressive. Did he remember when it was being built?

“Of course,” said the chief. He had been young, but it was an incredible time. He described the swimming pool, full of water, and the French workers who swam there. There had been thousands of people in Lorokon during that time, the entire area had been busy and lively with activity. He described it with a hint of awe, measuring the air with his hands to indicate the scale of the project and the complexity of its construction, pausing at several moments to make sure I was understanding him, and finishing by replacing his hands in between his knees and shaking his head slowly, as if in quiet appreciation for those years of hard labor and industriousness. I had the sense that it was a performance, one that he had possibly rehearsed before with travelers like myself, but it was a good performance.

“Wow,” I said. “But that was a long time ago.” I struggled as I attempted to put a question to him that was broad but would spur him to specificity.

“How is the dam now? What are its benefits? What do people here think about it?” I said, asking three questions instead of one.

“It’s useless,” the chief said, opening his eyes wide and looking grave.

“But what about the electricity?” I gestured to the fluorescent lights above us.

“That electricity,” Sifa said, “is not from the dam. That is solar, just a solar system they put on the roof. We don’t get any electricity from the dam. It all goes to Nairobi.”



“But that doesn’t make any sense. The dam is right there, there should be electricity here. Why isn’t it?”

He shrugged, his face matching the bafflement on mine. His eyes, which were large and limpid and a little watery, very effectively conveyed emotions like shock or disbelief and he was using them to their full potential right now as he revealed the great irony of the Turkwel Dam to me.

“Since the dam was built,” he went on, “the river doesn’t flow by Lorokon anymore. It is far away now. And the electricity from the dam doesn’t come here. We get nothing.” He put his hands up in a helpless gesture.

In a way, I had expected this. Like so many other similar infrastructural projects, the dam’s rewards – in this case, 106 megawatts of electricity, enough to power over one hundred thousand homes – were to be reaped only by those living in the metropole, in the Kenyan cities to the south. It was naive to imagine that the dam would have electrified Lorokon and other villages in West Pokot, villages that existed on those night-time maps of Africa as tiny pinpricks of light marooned in vast swathes of darkness, if they showed up at all. The irony was not even laughable; it was simply bitter. There was no room to joke about it – the dam was right there, hidden from us by the night but with a presence as real and undeniable as Chief Sifa’s as he sat before me with his enormous eyes and an earnest, hopeful expression on his face.

The KVDA offers visitors accommodation in the tract housing originally built for the French engineers and their families and that was where I slept after I left the bar. The house I was given was full of moldering furniture. Heavy couches, upholstered in the same sickly yellow hue, faced an ancient television. The bathrooms were tiled

greenish and the cupboards in them were full of women's clothing, lingerie and nightgowns, that I assumed the original tenants of the house had left behind when they returned to France.

Before I left the bar, Danny joined Sifa and I and the two men told me about the great potential they felt their home had for tourism. Danny worked as a ranger at the nearby Nasolot Game Reserve and he excitedly described the herds of elephant that were apparently numerous there and occasionally trampled through Lorokon in their search for food. Sifa talked about the beauty of the mountains that rose above the town and the many walking trails that threaded through them.

Their descriptions, which were rapturous, felt like a soft pitch to me, one that I had heard before in other villages across northern Kenya. These pitches always depressed me a little, because they were a reaction to the total lack of meaningful government investment in northern Kenya and also because they evinced a keen intelligence on the part of the pitchers, who believed – and with reason, as their belief was based on observations made about other parts of Kenya – that their economic salvation would come in the form of ecotourism, wealthy western tourists adding Lorokon as a stop on their Kenyan safaris. At the end of the pitch came their request of me, which was very simple: Could I tell other people in America about the Nasolot Game Reserve and the Turkwel Dam and Lorokon? Could I convince them to visit?

It was the hardest thing to hear and yet the easiest to agree to. Of course I would. I would proselytize, because I believed that anybody who visits Kenya would benefit from a stint in Lorokon. Even more enlightening would be an excursion up the mountain to walk across the Turkwel Dam, that quiet dynamo, a monument to state

power and reach from which visitors have an excellent view of the surrounding countryside and may even get to see a crocodile swimming in the green water below the dam.

## Boreholes

I didn't learn how to smoke weed properly until I was eighteen years old, although by then I had been hitting joints and smoking out of unwieldy bong and dinky little pipes for four years. The first time I smoked I was fourteen, on a rooftop with two other fourteen year-old boys. They passed me the bong and I took a hit. I held the smoke in my cheeks and then daintily expelled it. Nothing happened. I hadn't inhaled. And for the next four years of high school, at after school hangouts redolent with sour weed-smoke and house parties full of my red-eyed friends, I continued not inhaling. It wasn't on purpose. No one told me that I had to push the smoke down, past my throat and into my lungs. At one point, I wondered whether I had inherited some errant chromosome, a fluke in my genetic code, that rendered me impervious to marijuana's effects.

I discovered that was decidedly *not* the case two weeks before my nineteenth birthday, in Kenya, in Hachache's living room. It was a bright, clear day – mid-November in Marsabit. The town was awash in pale yellow butterflies, newly emerged from their chrysalises. They clustered trembling around puddles and as I'd hopped off the motorbike that brought me here, I noticed its wheels were slimy with a gray pulp of their wings. The living room was hemmed in by a muscular wrap-around couch and illuminated by the light streaming in through an open door.

Hachache was a trucker. We had met that morning. For the past month I had been living with Stephen Cowan, a Northern Irish missionary based in a village called Tuum that was about two days southwest of Marsabit by car. I had left Stephen and Tuum a week ago and after Stephen's intensity, his rigid dogma and schedule, I sat in

Hachache's house watching a joint get rolled with a delicious feeling of well-deserved delinquency.

"Husseina!" Hachache bellowed.

He sighed and passed the joint to Maskio, who puffed on it before passing it to Will, who passed it to Roberto, who got up and crossed the room to pass it to me. *The joint has completed a full circumnavigation of the living room*, the blank voice of a PA announcer repeated in my head.

It was my turn to hit the joint. I did what I always did with joints and attempted to pass it on.

"No, you didn't hit it. *Deep pull*. When the smoke is in your mouth, take a breath," Hachache said to me.

I tried again. To my surprise, the smoke slipped past my larynx and down into my lungs, where it circulated malevolently for a moment before I coughed and it rocketed out of me.

"There you go!" Hachache said approvingly. Maskio nodded and gave me a thumbs-up. There it was. The first inklings of the high were multiplying themselves across my body. *So this is what everyone was doing in high school*, I thought to myself.

"Husseina!" Hachache shouted again in the direction of the kitchen. Husseina glided out from the kitchen and lowered a steaming plate of pilau onto the table before disappearing again. We eyed it hungrily.

"*Kula, Maxi*," Hachache said, gesturing towards the food. Stoned for the first time, I felt as if he were inducting me into some Delphic ritual, and that my first bite of pilau would inaugurate the beginning of a long, obscure process of mystical initiation. Feeling everyone's eyes on me, I shrugged and scooped up a handful of rice.

I met Hachache by chance. It was my first time in Marsabit, having arrived the night before after a ten-hour bus ride from Loiyangalani. A chubby, sanguine American had sat in front of me and after working rubbery earbuds into his ears, watched *House* on his phone. It was slightly jarring, the juxtaposition between the material experience of being on the bus – the cracked leather on the seat poking into my thigh, dust swelling in through the windows, livestock and their herders turning to catch us as we passed – and the slim view I had through the gap in the seat backs of House, M.D., as he hobbled grimacing down aseptic hospital hallways.

We pulled into the town after dark. A blackout had seized Marsabit and I didn't realize we had arrived until the bus stopped and the lights came on inside. Walking along the highway, looking for a cheap hotel, my first impressions of the town were of dampness and little stores illuminated by phone flashlights. I stumbled into the Jey-Jey Centre, a foreboding caravanserai-like establishment. A narrow doorway cut into the hotel's rust-colored edifice led to a courtyard. It was like stepping into a monastery, dark and hushed. A group of men smoking cigarettes greeted me lazily and pointed me to a room. I washed my face and feet and collapsed onto the bed.

I awoke the next morning, aimless. I wanted to keep moving. A needling impatience worked on me. I went for chai at a *hoteli* next to the Jey-Jey. Marsabit was cheery and cool. Colonial administrators describe being enchanted by it. J.K.R. Thorp, posted there as the district commissioner in 1939, wrote of his first evening on the mountain, "We sipped tea and watched the brightly colored butterflies fluttering out of the great wall of forest which lay behind us...it was certainly very difficult to accept that,

just out of our sight, at the foot of the Mountain, a dusty, hot, lava-strewn desert stretched to the horizon in all directions.”

Still, in Marsabit, there is that distinct sense of elevation that Thorp describes, of reprieve and of an awareness – one particularly acute in northern Kenya, where the presence of mountains and hill ranges in the desert is a godsend – that existence is tenuous there. A little rain, trapped in clouds formed over the Indian Ocean by the warm, moisture-laden southeasterly wind known as the *Kusi*, floats over the featureless plains that stretch east from Marsabit to the sea. If those clouds manage to collide with any of northern Kenya’s mountains and get snagged on their peaks, the clouds will open up and unload – on a good year – maybe ten inches of rain total.

It was Marsabit’s more consistent rainfall, along with its abundant pastures and permanent water holes, that first made it a reliable dry-season redoubt for Gabra and Rendille pastoralists and then a natural spot for the British colonial administration to establish an outpost, from which a miniscule band of officials was given the task of bringing law and order to some 100,000 square miles of inhospitable terrain. The British worried about Ethiopian aggression from the north and Somali expansion from the west, both of which they believed were a threat to the productive farms and ranches of the “White Highlands” – the upland areas of central Kenya reserved for exclusive use by Europeans. They also hoped that if they secured the Northern Frontier District (northern Kenya’s colonial-era moniker) not only would they have a substantial buffer between themselves and any potential aggressors, but their investment in the region might end up paying for itself if a trade route could be created between the Kenya colony and Ethiopia. In 1909, having been briefed on his two-fold mission (secure the northern border; open up trade) the seasoned Kenya hand Geoffrey Archer and an entourage of

600 men were dispatched to Marsabit to introduce the British Empire to this “waterless desert country,” as he summed it up in a 1913 report.

In *To My Wife: 50 Camels*, her affectionate memoir of marriage to Gerald Reece, Archer’s successor in Marsabit, Alys Reece describes the NFD as a “bachelor stronghold.” British men – mostly unmarried and more often than not selected for their post due to their perceived “strength of character” rather than any deep understanding of the north and its people – ruled over it. Tellingly, Reece also describes them as living a “somewhat feudal existence.” In order to fulfill the first part of their mission in the north, that of imposing peace, these administrators made clumsy ethnic divisions between pastoralists and allotted each group certain grazing areas; they levied taxes and issued movement cards. In a sense, their methods were effective but they also curbed seasonal migrations and weakened their herds, dealing a significant and lasting blow to the north’s pastoralists.

These sunburnt bachelors were altogether less successful in getting trade off the ground. Transport was always a problem, security an issue and for the most part, the Ethiopians did not want to play ball. “There is only one way to treat the northern territories and that was to give them whatever protection one can under the British flag and otherwise leave them to their own customs,” Geoffrey Archer said in 1920. “Anything else is certainly uneconomic.”

Archer would have been shocked by the view I had from the *hoteli* of Marsabit in 2018: hawkers strolled up and down the street, shoving their wares into the open windows of *matatus* shuttling passengers between here and the Ethiopian border. Shops were busy and well-stocked; customers walked away from them with bags full, chatting on cell phones. With the completion of the Marsabit-Moyale road in 2016, the



hundred-year dream of Marsabit as a crucial entrepot between Kenya and Ethiopia had been finally realized. The tarmac had brought trade. And along with it, I noticed as I watched their drivers loitering outside the Jey-Jey, it had also brought dozens of noisy, overloaded trucks.

I studied each driver, trying to decide who I should approach as I finished my chai. A paleoarchaeologist in Loiyangalani had told me about a rock art site called Afgaba in Kalacha and I imagined a vague plan to visit it. If I caught a ride on a truck going that way, I could sleep in the church there and hitch back when I wanted to. It seemed dimly possible. I paid my bill and walked over to one trucker, attempting to infuse my walk with some kind of imprecise youthful cool.

*“Niaje, buda? What’s up, man? Where are you headed?”* I asked.

*“Dukana.”*

*“Any room here for a passenger?”*

He shook his head firmly and turned away from me. Feeling stupid, I stuffed my hands in my pockets and walked away, fixing what I hoped was an unflappable expression on my face. I could feel the other trucker’s eyes on me. A quick, biting embarrassment coursed through me.

As I reached the end of the line of trucks, I realized someone was shouting at me.

*“North Horr! North Horr!”*

I looked around wildly, trying to see who was yelling at me.

*“Mzungu! Hapa!”*

Two men stood fifteen feet off the ground, fastening something to a truck. I gaped at them, aware that everyone else on the street was turning to see what sort of interaction was about to unfold.

“North Horr!” They repeated, beckoning me closer.

“Are you going there?” I shouted back.

“Yes!”

“When?”

“Right now!”

“Ok! Five minutes!”

I ran back to the Jey-Jey, shoved my clothes into my bag, gave a thousand shillings to the clerk and ran back out. They were still there. I slowed down, a bit unsure of myself now. The door to the truck’s cab was open and a man was sitting in it, his face in shadow.

“*Niaje?*” I said.

“*Fiti,*” he drawled, exhaling blue smoke as he did.

This was Hachache. He took my bag and threw it behind the passenger’s seat. Then he grabbed my hand and helped me up into the cab. He started the engine and the truck lurched onto the highway, motorbikes slowing to dart around it as it turned. A gleeful sense of anticipation filled me, a loose-limbed freedom. *We’re off,* I thought.

But we were decidedly not off. The truck, Hachache told me, was carrying construction materials to a spot west of Ileret, a stone’s throw from the Ethiopian border, where some county official had decided a borehole should be drilled. It was already loaded high with bricks, bags of concrete, tarps, jerry cans, wheelbarrows and shovels. Roberto and Will sat on top of the bricks like young lords in a palanquin,

hailing people as we passed and occasionally sticking their heads into the cab for a hit of Hachache's joint. Maskio sat next to me. He had a crackly, excited energy that shot out of him erratically. *Maskio* means 'ears' in Kiswahili – not that his were abnormally large, but they did stick out noticeably from his head. He tapped his feet, chain-smoked, exchanged barbs with Hachache, shouted "*Maxi Maxi Maxiiii!*" when he felt my attention was slipping, and took dozens of terse, breathless phone calls.

The truck sighed and stopped outside of a wrought-iron gate. Maskio leapt out of the cab. "*Oye Mzee! Fungua milango! Open the door!*" He yelled, pounding on it. Roberto and Will dropped to the ground beside him. An old man shuffled out and opened the gate. A squat black ten-thousand liter tank sat expectantly in the sand behind it.

Maskio called for me. "*Maxi! Kuja!*"

The tank needed to be attached to the truck. As Hachache supervised, we half-lifted, half-rolled it into position behind the truck. Maskio and Roberto looped ropes around its bulk and shimmied up the truck while Hachache and I secured the other ends of the ropes to a bar above the back wheels. We pulled, and slowly the tank rose off the ground until it hung suspended off the back of the truck like an enormous bloated tick.

Panting quietly and pleased with ourselves, we admired our work. Hachache decided we should have lunch. His wife was making pilau. We left the truck parked at a gas station and grabbed boda-bodas to take us to Hachache's house.

"When are we going to Ileret?" I asked him, yelling against the wind into his ear.

"Soon," he said. And as if to quell my anxieties, he reached back and patted my knee gently.

I feel compelled to explain, or to boast, that the weed we smoked at Hachache's house for four lazy hours was from Shashamane. I've never been to Shashamane but it exists, in northern Kenya, as a hazy metonym. In 1948, grateful for the support lent the Ethiopians in their fight against the Italians by Black people in America and the Caribbean, Emperor Haile Selassie set aside five hundred acres of land, free for them to settle, in the southern Ethiopian town of Shashamane. A few bold migrants made the transatlantic trek in the fifties – twelve to be exact, eleven of them on steamers with the exception of one particularly adventurous soul who opted to walk there – but it wasn't until the sixties, and following Selassie's 1966 visit to Jamaica during which he encouraged Jamaicans to make the move to Shashamane, that the community really began to grow. At its peak in the nineties, some two thousand Rastafarians – motivated by their belief in Selassie's semi-divinity and the promise of free land in a mythic homeland – were living there, many of whom flocked to the town after the Ethiopian Civil War ended in 1991.

Today, if I hear someone say Shashamane, or shashemale, or simply shash it conjures up images of dreadlocks coiled under knitted tams, the subsonic wobble of Reggae, and bountiful, glittering Rasta weed. If you're smoking in Marsabit, or Laisamis, or Isiolo, and definitely in Moyale – any of the towns strung along the Isiolo-Moyale road that connects Kenya to Ethiopia – chances are you'll be smoking weed from Shashamane, or at least someone will tell you it's from Shashamane, because that's where the most potent, dank, consciousness-expanding kush is from. Never mind that it's illegal in both countries. It crosses the border stuffed in panels fitted underneath trucks or is brought by camel and car along some other frontier *panya* route. A recent

article in *The East African* notes an alarming new development in weed-smuggling: livestock traders hiding herb inside their animals. An agreement between Kenya and Ethiopia keeps the border open so that citizens of the two countries can freely cross between them without visas or passports – an agreement which facilitates Shashamane weed’s journey from the garden plots of its namesake town south to Kenya, where it ends up spilling out of joints like the ones I smoked that day, my introduction to the mingled pleasures and paranoias of marijuana.

At five o’clock, we were back at the gas station, full of pilau and pot. The energy was considerably lower. Hachache was singing quietly to himself, Maskio and Will were asleep, and Roberto had been dispatched to buy food for the journey.

I was sitting next to Hachache, feeling mellow and hollowed out from the weed. I reclined the passenger seat and watched the street scene in front of me. A dry, tawny light had settled over Marsabit, suffusing the view I had – cars, pedestrians, the highway, pale eucalyptus trees groaning in the wind, a half-constructed stadium across the road – with a wistful quality. Wanting to extend this image, I solemnly hummed a Beach Boys song.

*I’m a cork in the ocean,*

*Floating over the raging sea...*

Four men entered my field of vision. They were wearing jeans and sandals and each carried a backpack; three of them were younger and the fourth, a fedora perched jauntily on his head, was noticeably older. They sat down a few feet from the truck and checked their phones, pausing every few minutes to glance up at us.

“Hachache.”

“Uhhn.”

“Who are those guys?”

“Who?”

“The ones sitting right there.”

“Passengers.”

As we talked, two other men joined the group.

“They’re coming with us?”

“Mhm.”

“Do they live in Ileret?”

“No.”

“Why are they coming?”

“They’re workers.”

“On the borehole?”

“Mhm.”

Their group had grown by three more men. Hachache told me they were from all over Kenya. They had responded to an advertisement looking for contract laborers. Once they had bagged the job, they were told to meet the truck at this gas station on this day. Hachache’s boss – the real owner of the truck – had set it all up. It was an impressive feat of coordination.

Roberto trotted up to the door. I’d forgotten he had left. He cautiously passed Hachache a plastic bag through the window and the two talked in Gabra for a minute before switching to Kiswahili and inviting me to come look at his grocery haul. Roberto had purchased two boxes of arid biscuits, tea, sugar, maize flour to make ugali with, a loaf of pre-sliced bread, and several cases of sprite in miniature fist-sized bottles.

“We will buy a goat too,” Roberto said, assuming I was unimpressed with his shopping. “And look at this.” He dug around in his pocket and produced a neat bundle of about thirty joints bound together with twine. It looked like the chamber of a powerful futuristic revolver.

“This is our food. Smoking *bhanghi*, you don’t need to eat. You don’t get hungry.” Hachache stared at me seriously. This seemed like the opposite of what was universally known to be true about weed, but I just nodded and asked where it came from.

“Shashamane. Rasta. My brother brings it from Ethiopia.”

I broke eye contact with him and sank into my seat, beginning to feel dejected and sorry for myself. I was hungry and weed-weary, we had been sitting in this gas station for five hours, no one seemed in any hurry to get going, evening was approaching, we didn’t have much to eat and – Suddenly the truck roared into gear. Hachache revved the accelerator. Roberto, Maskio, and Will threw themselves into the cabin and squeezed in beside me. The truck rocked back and forth as the men outside began climbing into the bed and settling themselves among bags of concrete in the back. One of them banged on the roof of the cab once they were situated.

“Maxi. Ready?” Hachache said.

“Yes! *Twende!*”

We swung out onto the road. Maskio rolled the window down and began drumming on the door. Just as we were almost out of town, Hachache pulled over.

*No, I thought. Don’t stop.*

A small man in a tight polo shirt and jeans peeled away from a chai stand and jogged towards us. Maskio opened the door and he clambered in beside me, offering me his hand as he did.

“Joseph,” he introduced himself.

“Max.” I said.

The truck pulled away from the curb and we continued down the road. Joseph was clean-shaven and had small, intense black eyes that glittered elfishly. He carried a computer bag on his lap and looked like he was simply commuting to his nine-to-five.

The truck veered to the left and down a dirt track. We began descending Mount Marsabit. Through the windshield we could see a well-framed slice of northern Kenya. Conical hills reared up out of the sandy-colored plains like sails seen from the shore and above them clouds marched slowly across the sky.

“Maxi! Wake up!” Hachache ordered.

“I’m not asleep!” I said.

“No sleeping until Ileret.”

“Yes, sir,” I said jokingly.

Maskio whooped and started cackling. Hachache shoved a cassette into the deck and urgent, bouncing Borana music filled the cabin. Will and Roberto sang along, their voices surprisingly clear and earnest considering how much I had seen them smoke in the last few hours. I let out a whoop of my own; we were all possessed, I think, with the same loosening sense of space, and the strangeness of our companionship, and I felt a ballooning, weightless joy rush up my spine.

Night fell quickly and our elation subsided. The road was torturously potholed. The truck bellowed and lurched from side to side; Hachache gripped the wheel and negotiated painfully between gears. A bus loomed out of the darkness like some scarred, brawny species of deep sea fish and briefly flashed in our headlights before it vanished back into the night.



Every hour and a half Hachache stopped the truck and we peed and smoked a joint outside. It was a clear night and the landscape was soft and gentle in the moonlight. At the junction of the North Horr-Huri Hills road we stopped again and looked towards the hills. They were faintly luminescent and in the distance resembled kurgans, the Scythian burial mounds found in the Eurasian Steppe. Hachache lit another joint. I asked him what the hills were like.

“Very cold,” he said, pretending to shiver. “Lots of water. Lots of grass. Like England.”

The weed made me feel expansive. Hachache and I took a picture together at the signpost marking the road for the Huri Hills. Then we got back into the truck and kept on driving.

We drove through Kalacha and North Horr at midnight, sleeping towns with sandy streets, and after North Horr we hit a hard, flat plain glinting with salt. Hachache drove fast and relaxed.

Joseph was snoring softly next to me, but I could not sleep. I tried to make sense of the day, which lay as a fitful succession of starts and stops in my mind, amidst certain dominant, startling images, ones I knew would remain bright in my memory: a dog scampering out of our way as we barreled through North Horr, Hachache’s face illuminated in the dark by a match and abruptly flaring into life, the Milky Way’s chalky trace, encrusted with stars, as it vaulted through the sky and dissolved just above the Huri Hills, pointing a wispy finger to them.

The hills also intrigued me. They were a resolutely Gabra area – *Baada Huri* in that language – another place of refuge (along with Marsabit, of course) from the heat and aridity of the *Golbo*, the lowlands. In the 1970s, missionaries introduced eucalyptus

trees to the hills. Despite their deserved reputation as a rapacious, water-guzzling species that drain water tables and bears the responsibility for some of the desertification and decline in arboreal biodiversity northern Kenya has suffered, they are utilized in the Huri Hills in an ingenious way. Gabra agriculturalists in the hills figured out that if one encircles the base of a eucalyptus with plastic, it fills up with water as the morning mist condenses into water droplets and rolls down the tree's trunk. A thousand liters of water can be collected in a single morning using this method.

Water, and how to get it, has been a challenge in northern Kenya for a long time. As Africa dried out at the end of the African Humid Period – a ten thousand-year epoch during which the Sahara became a grassland dotted with enormous lakes and northern Kenya was much greener than it is now – the region's proto-pastoralists dug hundreds of deep wells across the land we were now passing in the truck. Lieutenant Leycester Aylmer, a rather dashing officer in the King's African Rifles, stumbled across some of those wells at El Wak, a town near the Somali border. "Some old men" Aylmer wrote "said that the wells were excavated by the Warday, a tribe of Galla origin long since conquered and assimilated by the Soraalis; others declared that they were the work of a tribe called Mathanli, who were conquered by the Gallas, and of whom all trace has now disappeared." All trace of them has indeed disappeared, except their wells and the burial cairns they left behind. Even those names, *Mathanli* and *Wardai*, are inventions. *Wardai* is a Gabra word and *Mathanli* a Somali one. "*Mathan*" is a type of grass found in northern Kenya and the suffix "*-le*" means "the people of." Our expedition to this borehole had many precedents; the tools had changed but the need for water was the same.

I was thinking about water, and huge plastic bags full of cold mist-water, and sipping from one of the tiny sprites in a feeble attempt to quench my thirst, when there was a loud hiss and a pop and the truck slumped to the left before Hachache hit the brakes.

“Flat,” Maskio said to me.

He roused Will and Roberto and the three of them shuffled outside silently. Joseph was still asleep. Hachache cracked the window and lit a cigarette.

“Maxi.” Hachache said.

“Hachache.”

“Are you ok?” He asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. How are you?”

“Good.”

I was surprised by the protective tone of his check-in. I watched his cigarette pulse in the dark before I fell asleep with my head in my elbow, collapsed against the dash.

A little breeze keened through the window. A fat cloud of weed-smoke hovered around Hachache’s face like a sallow aura before it was sucked out of the window and into the sky.

“Good morning, Maxi,” he said sweetly.

“Good morning, Hachache.”

He offered me the joint and I took a reluctant hit; *wake and bake*, I thought to myself idiotically. Being constantly high seemed to have no adverse effects on Hachache. When I asked him how he had been able to drive for twelve hours last night without

falling asleep, he said the weed helped him stay awake and that if need be, he could drive for three days without sleeping – in fact, he had done so before on drives south to Tanzania.

Outside, we stretched and looked around. We were stopped in the middle of a stony plain. At eight in the morning, the heat was already uncoiling itself across the rocks and trembling shrubs. The breeze – slivers of which had been so deliciously cool last night when they managed to pierce the cabin's stuffy atmosphere – was slowly being suffocated as the heat applied its force across the landscape: By midday, even in the shade of the spindly acacias that speckled the plain, it was oven-like.

Joseph was awake now and gnawing on a *mswaki* – a twig from the toothbrush tree, *Salvadora persica*. The Prophet Mohammed himself was aware of its antibacterial properties and prescribed it as part of Islamic hygiene. *Use the miswak, for the miswak purifies the mouth and is pleasing to the Lord*, he is recorded as saying in one hadith, advice followed by many across the Horn of Africa. Despite excessive fluoride contamination in East African water sources, a result of volcanic activity in the region that leaves many people's teeth stained brown, miswak users probably have better and stronger teeth than even the most assiduous toothbrusher. I rubbed a finger across my own teeth, furry from lack of brushing. Perhaps he had another miswak that I could use. I was also intrigued by him because he remained somewhat aloof from Hachache and his crew and was also obviously not a laborer. Already in my mind I had constructed a division between the cabin-dwellers – myself, Hachache, Joseph, Maskio, Roberto, and Will – and the roof-dwellers – the workers we were ferrying to the borehole.

I walked up to him and asked if he had another miswak; he reached into his pocket and gave me one. I thanked him and asked him if he knew where we were. He

squinted at our surroundings, as if taking stock of them for the first time, and said that we weren't far from somewhere called Derati. I sat down next to him as he started a fire for our morning chai. He worked in the county government office and was accompanying us to supervise the construction materials delivery to the borehole site. He was Daasanach, from "near Ileret." He had gone to college down country and, he explained, would be our interpreter once we reached our destination.

As we talked, Roberto and Will replaced the flat tire. They worked with great concentration and poise; energetically pumping the jack, loosening the nuts, muscles jumping when they dragged the wheel – nearly five feet tall – off its axle before replacing it with another retrieved from the truck's underbelly. The entire process took fifteen minutes. Hachache turned the key and the truck gave a series of soft grunts: We were ready to go. Joseph and I finished our chai, smothered the fire and hurried back to the cab.

"Where next?" I asked.

Maskio and Hachache answered me in unison: "Derati."

Let me introduce you to Jim Rainey. Jim is a mercenary. Aggressive and mustachioed, his services are available to whoever the highest bidder might be. His moral compass has a needle that directs him to the largest pile of cash. He is ruthless, cruel and explosive. And in Peter McCurtin's *Ambush at Derati Wells*, the sixth in a collection of artlessly-published 1970s action paperbacks, he finds himself caught between a nasty group of Russian arms dealers and a nasty group of Ethiopian rebels, battling over a downed plane full of AK-47s in the *luggas* and flinty plains surrounding Derati, Kenya – a place where "nobody seemed to die of old age."

That is probably the only, inglorious mention of Derati in fiction. The same J.K.R.Thorpe who wrote so admiringly of Marsabit's temperate microclimate built a police post there in the early forties, when Italian incursions into the territory during the Second World War were becoming a problem. Not much has happened here since then.

Derati was empty when we pulled in at midday. Two hills pointed at the sky. Below them, there was a fecund mess of palms surrounding a water hole. A tin rondavel, dented and carelessly erected on the rocks overlooking the oasis, looked like the battered nose of an antique spaceship. Flattened plastic bottles lay inert in the sand around the hut.

We got out of the truck. Two police officers came out of the rondavel and smiled at us vacantly. Hachache and Maskio greeted them and they went off to talk underneath an acacia. As I neared the rondavel, I realized that its metal walls were covered in graffiti. I stepped closer and began reading.

#### PLIZ TAKE NOTE

- 1.) WE ONLY GRANT SEXY LADIES ACCOMODATION
- 2.) USILETE UJINGA YA MANYATTA HAPA
- 3.) HAKUNA KITI (PLIZ)
- 4.) MDOMO PELEKA KWAKO
- 5.) WOMEN ARE NOT o2 WE CAN DO WITHOUT
- 6.) HII KAZI HAINA ASANTE
- 7.) NO COMMAND REQUEST ONLY

The graffiti was written in thick white paint and in a hand that signaled alarm; reading it felt as though someone were screaming at you. Point number two urged people not to bring “the idiocy of the *manyatta* (pastoralist camps enclosed by a fence of thorns) here.” Number three informed visitors that there were no chairs in Derati. Four continued in much the same vein as number two and asked that people do their complaining and grousing at their own homes, not at the police post. Lastly, point number six stated that “this work comes without thanks.” WAPI (where) HUMAN RIGHTS someone had written in between the numbered list several times. THE ONLY WOMAN WHO KNOWS WHERE HER HUSBAND IS IS A WIDOW another slogan scrawled sideways promised ominously. The police officers reclining in the sand with Hachache looked threatening to me now. I wondered whether this was their handiwork or if their forebears had left this, a testament to the isolation and bitter loneliness of the place and a warning to any successors. The officers stationed here now were young, probably just a few years older than myself, and surely not from this area. They woke up every morning to the sun hammering down upon their rondavel, the air inside superheated and heavy as an anvil. They smoked cigarettes and drank sprite. Sometimes a truck like ours would come through and stop for an hour and that was the extent of their social life.

I walked away from their hut and down towards the oasis. It was much more sane there. A big herd of camels was groaning happily among the palms. Two young camelherds were looking after them, their guns resting coolly against a rock. They had walked from their camp “that way” they said – towards the east – to water their camels here. I sat down next to the herders and watched the camels nuzzle and nip at each other. The air was thick with the warm smell of animal piss; camels urinate on

themselves to cool down. Thin rivulets of urine raced down their legs and darkened the sand beneath them.

At the center of the oasis was a well. Two men were standing in it. The first man passed a bucket to the second, who was standing on a ledge above the water, and he would fill it and pass it back. Slowly, they were filling a long concrete trough. The well was only about twelve feet deep and was shaded by an overhanging bush that ostensibly kept the water cool and prevented debris from falling in.

My truck-mates were watching this process. I sat down next to a portly, baby-faced man who had hiked his undershirt above his belly and was fanning himself with a flip-flop. It's very hot, he said to me, looking pained. He told me that he was from Nakuru – a large, busy city far to the south – and to call him Jayden. I asked him why he'd taken this job, one that brought him so far from home. Oh, he said. I was told that we would be going to Lake Victoria, not Lake Turkana. What do you mean? I asked, suddenly confused. The job advert said it was a job near Lake Victoria, he explained. Another man chimed in: Yes, that's what it said. I thought we would be working in Homa Bay. He was the older man I'd noticed at the gas station wearing a fedora. But, I said, Lake Victoria is in the complete opposite direction from Lake Turkana. When you were told to go to Marsabit, didn't you think... I trailed off. They shrugged. It's the same job, Jayden said. Just in a different place than I thought. It's only for two weeks, the older man added.

They seemed in good spirits despite the deception. I was baffled. Does this kind of thing happen a lot? I asked. I don't know. It's the first time it's happened to me, Jayden said, laughing in a way that suggested an ease with misfortune.



We wandered back to the truck, a white goat bought from the herdsmen in tow. The police post looked even more disconsolate from far away, like a rusty coin thrown in the dirt. Hachache stood up when he saw us and announced that we were leaving. He had two new boxes of sprite under his arm. We stumbled back into the truck. James trussed the goat and slung it over his shoulders. Hachache started the truck and we rolled gently away from Derati.

We drove for six more hours. Nobody talked in the cab. Hachache's eyes were red and unfocused as he stared at the road. The same queasy music played on repeat. The only people we saw were a man and a small boy loping away from us as we crossed a plain filled with blonde grass.

By five in the evening, we were close to Lake Turkana and could see it through gaps in the hills, shining in the setting sun like a piece of sheet metal. We stopped at a manyatta on the side of the road, three or four oblong domes supported by a skeleton of pliant sticks and covered in stiff hides. A handsome man, his hair teased into thick, short, ochraceous braids, ducked out of the manyatta's entrance and walked over to us, followed by his family. Joseph stuck his head out of the window and hailed him. The two began talking amiably. Some young girls, babies open-mouthed and lolling about on their hips, stared at us through the windshield. An old man, naked but for a cloak around his shoulders, sat on a stool and gazed up at us, his eyes cataract-blue and watery.

"Who are these people?" I asked Hachache. "Gabra? Daasanach?"

"Not Gabra," he replied, "Daasanach people."

There was a hint of derision in his voice when he said *Daasanach*, the well-pleased scorn of a person encountering someone who finally has less than themselves. His scorn, in this case, was perhaps reinforced by a long history of enmity that the Daasanach – also known as the Gelubba, Merille, Reshiat, or the Shangilla; names applied to them by their neighbors – have with the Gabra. The Gabra have a distinct sense of their own uniqueness. They keep a remarkable oral record of their history. It revolves in seven-year cycles, with each year being called by the name of the day on which it begins. As there is no leap year in this system, the new year always begins on the day of the week following the day on which the old year began. In order to distinguish between years of the same name, each year is tagged with an important event that happened during that year. For example, 1914 – or *Arbaa Worra Ali Ganya*, the Wednesday year of Ali Ganya’s family – refers to the massacre of Ali Ganya and his family by a Daasanach raiding party. The next year, 1915 (or *Kamisa Worra Guyo Bitacha*, the Thursday year of Guyo Bitacha’s family), is defined by the Daasanach massacre of Guyo Bitacha and his family, part of a pattern of raiding during that year that saw the Daasanach attack seven different places.

Quite a few of these years are defined by violence between the two groups, Gabra and Daasanach. The Daasanach often seem to have the advantage, able to hop the border when the Kenyan side becomes too heated, where they are abetted by their Ethiopian kin. In 1996, well-armed with Ethiopian military equipment discarded in the wake of the Ethiopian Civil War, Daasanach warriors killed about twenty Gabra women and children and stole a huge number of livestock. Pursued by the Kenyan police, the raiders ambushed them, killing nineteen policemen and then returning to Ethiopia. This perennial violence, their ambiguous national identity – “Not quite Kenyan, not really

Ethiopian, they've had a hard time of it..." a white Kenyan farmer remarked to me – consigns them to a state of unease, on the periphery of the periphery yet increasingly squeezed between Kenya and Ethiopia as the two countries gradually turn the giant eye of their attentions to the borderlands. From this perspective, our truck and its cargo could be seen as an emissary, representing the forefront of Kenya's ambitions for itself. If one pictured the Kenyan state as a vine advancing up a wall, then we were the furthest, most attenuated tendril – alone for now but with a bristling mass of supplementary vines not far behind.

Joseph clasped hands with the chief. Three young men strutted over to us, carrying wooden stools and rifles, and climbed into the back of the truck. "Bodyguards," Maskio said. We waved goodbye and Hachache executed a nimble three-point turn, sending us back up the road we had come down. He made a sudden left and abandoned the track, driving off-road up a low hill. After ten minutes we stopped at a shallow depression in between hills, a stretch of flat land punctuated by several dense clumps of euphorbia and the metallic cylindricality of a wellhead poking up out of the sand. We had arrived at the borehole.

The light was fading fast. In the hovering pink glow of the sunset, everything looked felted and inviting. We stood around for a moment, hesitant and disoriented by our arrival here, abruptly aware of sounds other than the truck's rumble. Maskio and Will started to build a fire and with a jolt, we stumbled back into action. Hachache and Roberto led the bleating goat behind a tree. James and Jayden cleared the ground of stones and unfurled a tarp. Men unpacked their blankets and walked around holding their phones in the air, searching for network. A scorpion scuttled out from under the tarp, claws bravely aloft, only to be dispatched by the flat end of a machete.

*What a beautiful site for a borehole.* But I noticed that already, within an hour of arriving, our presence was despoiling the place. A tree had been mutilated for firewood. Hachache had dumped a bag full of cigarette butts, plastic wrappers, and sprite bottles on the ground and the wind was rapidly distributing them around our campsite. During our journey here, the human footprint upon each place we drove through could be gauged by the amount of plastic trash visible there: A polypropylene midden was accumulating around the police post at Derati, but the last few hundred kilometers of roadside since then had been nearly pristine, save for the occasional cigarette butt, evidence of the passage of previous truckers. Two weeks from now this borehole – which as of yet bore no name – would have its own plastic record of the men who stayed here and built a well.

The goat was brought back to the fire in pieces – legs, thighs, ribs, and its skinny head. Hachache carefully supervised the cooking. He had changed out of his pants and into a red-and-blue geometrically patterned sarong that ended just above his ankles. He had been fatherly towards me for the past two days in a stoned kind of way; as he delivered a sinewy goat leg to me, he mussed my hair affectionately.

The fire became coals and we started arranging our bedding on the tarp. I just had a cotton kikoi for a blanket, but Jayden offered to share his with me, insisting that it was big enough for the two of us. I got under next to him and listened to his breathing change and become more relaxed until he was snoring. I drifted off quickly after that.

Two-thirty in the morning. A persistent, sharp-edged breeze had burrowed under the blanket and woke me up. I was cold. I looked around the campsite. The three Daasanach warriors were lying supine and perfectly still in the moonlight, their heads

propped up by their *kara* – their stools – and their arms folded across their chests like sarcophagi. I tried to fall back asleep but the breeze wouldn't let me. My sweater was in the truck, where Hachache was asleep. I paced around the door to the cab for a few minutes before deciding I didn't want to wake him up. I climbed into the back of the truck, where there was a lee, and curled up against the flat tire, adjusting my body under my kikoi until I was warm enough to fall asleep.

Tea, biscuits, and a joint. Sated, we got back in the truck. The well-builders had emptied it out, leaving only the ten-thousand liter tank standing in the back. Time for work, time for work, Hachache said, hitching up his sarong and tying it above his knees. The truck, lighter now, surged forward and left the campsite in a wash of dust.

We stopped again at the manyatta and twenty or so women and children ran out, yellow jerry cans in hand, and hoisted themselves up onto the side of the truck. We continued driving until Hachache braked and nudged Joseph, who shouted something in Daasanach, prompting two little boys to come scampering forward. They sprinted ahead of the truck and directed Hachache offroad, over a wide plain dotted with gray and brittle scrub; yelling back at us, they pointed out holes in the ground with exaggerated alarm, waving their arms in the air and hopping up and down. They reminded me of dolphins playing in the bow wave of a ship. We followed the boys down into a *lugga* commanded by a knotted old African olive and then up a hill, at the top of which I could see a concrete cistern, like a bunker, surrounded by women and coarse-haired little donkeys.

This, according to Joseph, was the area's primary water source – soon to be supplemented by our new borehole a few miles to the south, he added hopefully – and it

was crowded today. A long, dark stripe of damp earth decorated with a few glossy clumps of grass wound its way down the hillside, fed by water spilling from the pump and trickling into the soil. We were here to fill our tank so that our borehole site would have a supply of drinking water as well as the water necessary for mixing concrete.

There was a queue, however, and we would have to wait our turn. Hachache backed the truck up close to the pump and we got out. Occupied with filling dozens of jerry cans, no one seemed bothered by our presence. I sat down with my back against the cistern, a group of boys – some probably about my age, others much younger – studying me warily from a few paces away.

“*Mambo?*” I greeted them.

The younger ones spun around to avoid looking at me. The older boys just looked down and wormed their feet into the dirt; they were either very shy or did not speak Kiswahili – a language unnecessary to them, so far were they from any Kiswahili-speaking metropole. They were dressed in tightly-wrapped sarongs and loose olive-green button-downs, adorned with small epaulettes on the shoulders and baggy breast pockets. I’d noticed that this kind of shirt was worn widely across northern Kenya and wondered where they came from: Were they army discards from Ethiopian or Sudanese wars, or had they been shipped to Kenya in bales from the west, the result of some military clothier’s sell-off? They looked good on the boys and complemented their rifles and bandoliers, slung casually across shoulders and around waists.

A trio of small boys approached me gingerly, eyes fixed on mine, until they were just a few feet away. Their elders remained aloof, but laughed when one of the boys stretched out a hand and began reverently running it up and down my leg, perplexed and intrigued, I saw, by how hirsute I was.

I stayed like this until the novelty wore off and the boys walked away. Joseph sat with me and we watched the women at the pump as they filled their jerry cans. When a can was filled, a boy grabbed it and brought it over to the donkeys. Each donkey carried six jerry cans, hung across their spines, the weight of one counterbalancing that of another. The cans rested against two oval panels made of wicker and twine on either side of the donkey. They made the load easier to carry and – quite humanely, I thought, looking over the long and patient procession of tail-flicking donkeys – prevented their skin from chafing against the plastic cans. Once a donkey train was loaded up, their owners drove them down the hill with tapered switches, stamping up great clouds of dust as they crossed the dry plains until all that could be seen and heard of them was a faint ashen smudge on the horizon and the distant swinging sound of the iron bells tied around their necks.

Two hours passed before we could use the pump. It was midday and the sun was at its zenith. Joseph and I lay on our sides in the tank's rapidly dwindling shade, breathing hotly through our mouths. Hachache connected a thick length of hose from the spigot to our tank and called Maskio up to pump first. He unstuck himself from the passenger seat of the truck and walked over to it confidently. He rolled his shoulders and swung his arms, cracked his neck, took off his shirt and tossed it to Will, spat into the dirt, took a last drag and flicked his cigarette behind him, stepped up to the pump, adjusted his grip on the handle, and then threw his body into it, slamming the handle down and yanking it back up, moving so fast and efficiently that it began to look like he and the pump were part of the same machine.

By the time the tank was full it was evening and we were exhausted. Each of us had had a turn at the pump. Our hands were blistered and our sweat had cooled on our skin, coating us in a clammy film. We were the last ones to leave the pump, the truck's brakes squealing against the weight of ten thousand liters of water as we skidded back down the hill and towards the road. Hachache smoked pensively. Maskio fell asleep upon sitting down in the passenger seat, his body crumpled and limp against the door. We neared the road and after a nauseating second during which it seemed the truck might collapse backwards and roll over, we tottered back onto it. Two dik-diks – shy, rabbit-sized antelopes that inhabit much of the scrubland of eastern and southern Africa – were crossing the road. Hachache pushed the accelerator hard; the truck leapt forward and bore down upon the dik-diks. The antelopes started dashing frantically up the road, the truck's massive ridged wheels just inches from them. Hachache nudged the steering wheel to the right and one of the dik-diks bounced off it and flew into a bush. The other scampered into the scrub.

“*Alhamdulillah,*” Hachache muttered gravely. He got out and grabbed the dik-dik by its back legs and gave it to me to hold. The blow it had received from the wheel had killed it immediately; its black eyes were already matte and lustreless and it looked pitifully small and tremulous on my lap. Dik-diks are monogamous and as I looked at the animal – its precise hooves, the subtle upwellings of gray amidst its otherwise tan fur, its snout – I imagined her partner (we had killed a female dik-dik) crouched in the bush, nose twitching for our scent, abruptly made a widower.

An hour later we had eaten the dik-dik and the sun was gone. The antelope's meat was meagre and stringy and tasted like whatever it was they ate around here – desiccated leaves and shoots in this case, I guessed – and the slender leg I'd been given



barely amounted to a mouthful of meat. I could copy Maskio, who had cracked open the bone and was sucking out the marrow with relish, but it seemed more trouble than it was worth. I tossed the bone into the dirt behind me, where it would be picked clean first by jackals and vultures and then by smaller carnivores and finally by insects, until it became smooth and light and pale. I lay back onto the tarp and thought about the excavations at Koobi Fora, not at all far from here, where teams of sunhatted volunteers crawled on hands and knees through the dirt, searching for fragments of bone from various human ancestors.

In 1994, Maeve Leakey and her team discovered fossils of *Australopithecus* on the shores of Lake Turkana. *Australopithecus* was a sort of refined primate, halfway-human, that ate a lot of fruit (judging from the molars some eagle-eyed paleontologist found) and experimented with walking on two legs about four million years ago, on the land where I was now beginning to fall asleep. They coexisted alongside early examples of the genus *Homo* – us – and perhaps the two species even interacted. As I started to drift off, I pictured a cinematic encounter between them; startled *Australopithecus* flinging themselves into the trees as their more fluidly bipedal relatives stumbled upon them in a clearing.

When we woke up the next morning, our Daasanach security detail was impatient with us: They wanted to be paid, or just wanted to go back to their manyatta, or were simply bored with this dull job; Joseph seemed reluctant to explain their unhappiness. Either way, some sourness had crept into things and I sat next to the truck and watched Joseph as he tried to mollify them. His interlocutors looked restless and annoyed and only spoke in monosyllables to him.

Hachache drew me aside, along with Maskio, Roberto, and Will. Perhaps he sensed that as a leader, he needed to provide us with some sort of structure and assurance. He outlined a plan: We would leave here tonight and go to Ileret, on the shores of Lake Turkana, where, he promised in the manner of a father placating a moody child, we could “eat fish and have cold drinks.” We just had to go and collect sand today so that the construction workers could begin construction – sand, along with yesterday’s water, being necessary for mixing concrete.

We nodded our agreement. Hachache clapped me on the back and the five of us passed a joint around until my head felt like it was full of TV static; I leaned against a wheel of the truck next to Joseph and fainted. I floated out of my body and surveyed the landscape before turning back to regard myself: Joseph was shaking me, Hachache had his back turned to me, the Daasanach guys were looking at me curiously. There was a feeling of tension, as if I had reached the end of a leash, and I was tugged back into my body. I came to and was suddenly faced with the difficulty of trying to put into Kiswahili words what had happened to me. I stuttered and gave up. Joseph asked if I was alright. Yes, I replied. That was really weird, I said to him. You need to drink water, he said, placing a bottle in my hands. The strangeness of the episode faded and I chalked it up to the heat and dehydration. There wasn’t any time to linger on it anyways. Hachache called for me. It was time to go get the sand. I stood up unsteadily and hauled myself into the truck yet again.

The sand collection happened quickly. Maskio and Will did most of the shoveling, leaving a wet hole in the riverbed. It took two hours to cover the truck’s bed and fill it to a depth of two or three feet. Back at the campsite we emptied it out. The components

required to mix concrete – sand, water, some loose gravel, taut bags of cement that would bind it all together – were in piles next to the wellhead. Over the next two weeks, James, Jayden, and the rest of their crew would surround the wellhead with a concrete base and build a series of troughs so that people could water their animals here. Our work – which really just amounted to transportation – was finished. We packed up quickly and were drinking chai when Roberto shouted out in pain and shot out of his seat. He lay on the ground convulsing.

“Something bit me,” he said, wincing.

Sickly virescent hives were beginning to seethe across his body. We stripped him to his underwear and laid him in the cab. He was groaning in pain, sweat dripping off his forehead and onto the seat.

“He needs to go to a hospital,” Maskio said.

Hachache nodded thoughtfully. He agreed. We wouldn’t be going to Ileret after all. Our departure, which had been so leisurely a moment ago, became urgent. I said a quick goodbye to Jayden. “If you’re ever in Nakuru,” he said, handing me a piece of paper with his number and Facebook handle on it, “give me a call.” I told him I would and wished him luck.

Hachache started the truck and we began pulling away from the campsite. The men we had brought here stood up and waved and a few took pictures of the truck as it left, as if a picture of our truck and what it represented – their ride back to Marsabit, cold drinks, phone service, their families and friends waiting for them back at home – would provide some consolation during the next two weeks of their isolation here.

We drove back through the night, wide awake, Roberto moaning and writhing feebly behind us, the rest of us offering him sprite and tepid reassurances. Amongst ourselves, we had manic, brainless conversations that largely revolved around what cold drinks we would have once back in Marsabit.

“Coca-cola – *baridi*,” Hachache said, banging his hand against the steering wheel in anticipation of the cold coke awaiting him.

“Fanta – Fanta for me – *baridi*,” Maskio asserted.

“Sprite *baridi*,” I said, swallowing another hateful mouthful of the last of our hot sprite.

The truck was light and speedy now that it carried no cargo. We blasted through Derati, honking as we passed the police post, noted the spot where we’d got our flat, emerged onto the broad shining plains north of North Horr, slept for three hours outside of a general store in that town, and as light began to flood the horizon, found ourselves not far from Marsabit, in an oasis town called Kalacha.

Kalacha is apparently named after a man who bore that name. The town only came into being after independence, in 1963. We drove through it slowly, passing a stone church and a shuttered line of general stores. Plastic bags, blown about by the wind, festooned the acacias and thorny fences that guarded houses.

We drove through the town and continued until Hachache stopped the truck in a grove of untidy, hispid Doum palms and we got out shakily. The sky was pink and purled with feathery clouds and the air was still cool from the night. In front of us there was a concrete wall topped with looping barbed wire. A channel – also of concrete and about three feet deep – carried water from under the wall and then was lost to view in the

palms. It was still and quiet except for the muted burble of water as it flowed through the channel and the cooing of pigeons in the trees.

“*Twende tuoge*,” Hachache said, pulling his shirt over his head. It’s time to bathe.

Joseph, Maskio, Will, and Roberto – who still looked pallid but whose hives had miraculously subsided – started to strip and I followed suit. We sat together in the channel, all facing forward. The water was satiny and intoxicatingly warm, enough so that it made the air feel cold by comparison. I imagined there was some remnant, flickering volcanism, deep underground, that heated it to such a lovely temperature and as I lowered myself into the water, pictured a molten core of magma churning beneath us, distant emissions of its heat traveling through miles of rock and slowly warming the aquifer that this water came from. I lay flat in the water, enjoying the sensation of it patiently stripping away the layers of sweat and grime on my skin.

I came up for air and the sounds of soaping and scrubbing surrounded me. Hachache threw me a white bar of soap and a rough stone. I worked at my skin with the stone and then I stood up and lathered myself in soap. An old man in a crisp white *kofia*, following his goats to their pasture, saw me and gave a wave.

We stayed there for an hour, not talking much, busy with cleaning ourselves. Afterwards, we smoked a cigarette and ate some biscuits and then we drove across the Chalbi Desert. We got to Marsabit as the sun was setting and we said goodbye outside the *hoteli* where we had met, promising that we would meet again and go back to Ileret – really go to Ileret, and have cold sprite and fish from Lake Turkana there – and go to the Huri Hills as well and also to Dukana and even Forole, the sacred massif right on the border with Ethiopia, all these places and more. We exchanged numbers and I waved

until the truck had disappeared around a bend in the highway. At the Jey-Jey I fell asleep immediately and woke up the next morning to a heavy Marsabit fog.

The next time I was in Marsabit was four years later. I always thought I would see Hachache and Maskio, Roberto and Will, again. And when I called Hachache's number one afternoon last summer in Marsabit, I hoped that he would pick up and after a moment of confusion – who's this?? – he'd remember me and invite me over for a meal and a joint. But someone else picked up, who wasn't Hachache and didn't know who he was.

## Dalle

Four years after I learned to smoke weed there, I found myself back in Marsabit, standing in front of a heavy black gate. It was late in July, 2022, and I was here to attend the summer session of the Dalle Abraham Writer's Retreat. The gate swung open and like a slice of cake, frosted in pink and white and protected from the street by a dense thicket of euphorbia, the retreat appeared. I felt slightly embarrassed as I took in the house where I would be staying for the next two weeks. Its neat angles and bright colors contrasted unfavorably with my torn jeans and ratty t-shirt, my long hair and generally disheveled appearance. The overstuffed bag that was digging into my shoulders suddenly seemed to announce my status as a backpacker a little too loudly. I took it off, put it on the ground and moved a few feet away from it. I felt like a Dickensian orphan, deposited on the doorstep of an estranged and mysterious relative.

But that, of course, was not the case. I was not an orphan and Dalle was not a relative of mine. He was a new friend, one I had met for the first time the previous day and who invited me to move out of my gloomy lodgings at the New Victorian Hotel, a garish building coated in a facade of blue glass that illuminated the rooms in a sad, murky light, and into his house, where he lived with his wife and their two-year old son. Dalle is a writer born and raised in Marsabit. He had put his hometown on the map of literary Kenya. "It is made big" wrote Dalle, describing the town, "by the expansive deserts that surround it – Korole, Kaisut and Chalbi – places that those of us born in the cosy embrace of the town's micro-climate called "space", picturing the surface of the moon."

Dalle's house was not really a writer's retreat, but writers – Dalle's friends – had stayed there and found it a place conducive to writing. Abdul Adan spent a month there and wrote a thousand words a day. Carey Baraka did the same. At the end of the day they sat in the living room and read their work aloud as Dalle, sideways in an armchair, listened to them, occasionally offering an appreciative 'hmm' in response to particularly piercing lines. I stayed with Dalle and his family for two weeks that July and then, almost exactly a year later, we spent two weeks road-tripping through western Kenya together. I wasn't a writer, but nursed a secret hope that I might become one, in spite of the discouraging state of journalism and the publishing industry. Dalle and I were different; we had different ideas about what writing was for and what it could do, but he, more than anyone, showed me that it was possible – and even reasonable – to imagine that what I had to say about Kenya and about myself might be worthy, readable, important.

Baudelaire had Paris, Joyce had Dublin, and Dalle Abraham has Marsabit. I met him for the first time on one of those days particular to his town, when a cloudbank settles over the mountaintop and a heavy fog muffles the streets. He was waiting for me at a cafe near the gate to the Marsabit National Park. His texts to me, which were cool, spare and perfectly punctuated, had prepared me to meet someone aloof and slightly fastidious. He was neither of those things. He was taller than I expected and immediately warm to me, with the confidence of someone who feels a complete familiarity in their setting. Over the next two hours, I was exposed to a cross-section of some of Dalle's predominant interests: the history of the Oromo people, the Shifta War, Kenya's largely forgotten campaign against Somali irredentists during the 1960s, the



physical geography of northern Kenya, African literature, Borana music, Marsabit politics, writing. I was nervous to meet him and probably seemed it; I tried to match his references and contribute my own; I told him about a ‘project’ I was working on (at the time, I had a vague but earnest interest in the politics of water in Northern Kenya) and Dalle was encouraging, telling me he knew a few people I should talk to.

Afterwards, the fog having lifted, we walked around Marsabit and talked some more. In my diary I wrote simply that I had had a lovely day. That night, Dalle texted me and suggested I move into his house.

It took me a few days to understand Dalle’s routine. I was a nervous guest and usually waited until I could hear Dalle moving around in the living room or clearing his throat before I came out of my bedroom. “I’m not babysitting,” he told me early on. “Right,” I nodded, making a resolution to occupy myself as much as possible.

We would eat breakfast together with his wife and son. Then as the morning fog burned off, Dalle would begin writing. I didn’t realize that he was writing until I finally asked him what he was doing on his phone and he told me, to my astonishment, that he was working on his book. He was digital; I was analog. I toted a moleskine notebook and wrote in a cursive hand that immediately became illegible to me, forcing me to spend hours deciphering what I had written in a few minutes. Dalle, meanwhile, had a Google drive full of projects and projects-in-progress; he was not constrained by my uncertain and yet ingrained belief that the best ideas and the best prose came via a pen and paper. He read entire books on his phone – when I recommended *Zinky Boys* by Svetlana Alexievich to him, he downloaded it and read it in three days – and the grant proposals and project reports he was hired to write for various NGOs he did on his phone as well.

He had a computer, but he preferred to use his phone. It was the most productive use of a smartphone I had ever seen.

He was working on a big project: an oral history of the Shifta War. For months he had traveled back and forth across the north, from small towns along the Somali border to cities like Isiolo, looking for old-timers with memories of the conflict. He had sat with them, chewed *khat*, listened to their stories, transcribed them and now, draped over the couch, he was editing what he had gathered. I was excited about the project. If published, I thought it might catapult him to some kind of fame, win him grant money or his deserved position as the north's true chronicler.

I knew a little about the Shifta War – it was a conflict over secession fought between the north's Somali population and Jomo Kenyatta's newly-independent Kenyan government – but as Dalle explained it to me, I realized that the war could be seen as the event that wrenched northern Kenya out of the pastoral, somnolent decades that preceded Kenya's independence and thrust it firmly into the present. If there is one event that can be called the key to understanding the past fifty years of northern Kenya's history, it is the Shifta War.

For four years between 1963 and 1967, Somali irredentists, buoyed by ideological and material support from the Somali Republic and their dream of a "Greater Somalia" that would encompass all the territories home to a Somali majority in the Horn of Africa, fought a guerilla war against Kenya. The war began auspiciously for them: heavy rains that year dampened the Kenyan response to the insurgency and they enjoyed support from the north's civilian population. Yet as the war dragged on, the *shiftas* (Kiswahili for bandit) lost their momentum. Support dried up; they became overwhelmingly reliant on Somalia to send them aid and arms; and starting in 1966, the

Kenyan army initiated a brutal campaign of villagization in northern Kenya. They rounded up pastoralists, regardless of their ethnic affiliation or participation in the war, and forcibly confined them to ready-made “villages” that were essentially prison camps, surrounded by barbed wire and deep trenches. In the villages, pastoralists were subject to a dawn-to-dusk curfew and only allowed to graze their animals within a five-mile radius of each village – any further and they would be punished by the security forces that controlled the villages. Without the expansive grazing their herds required, pastoralists in the villages became dependent on food aid and their diet, formerly dominated by milk and meat, started to look more like that of a Kenyan living to the south: ugali and potatoes, chapatis and beans. After-school clubs taught children how to plant crops and discouraged herding: on the whole, villagization was meant to reengineer the north, transforming a society of nomadic pastoralists into steady farmers, in line with the Kenyan state’s ideal vision of its citizenry.

Villagization ended the Shifta War and it broke the north. Fifty-six years later, pastoralist’s herds – their wealth – have still not recovered to their pre-war numbers. Forced sedentarization in the villages gave rise to an aid economy that keeps much of the north’s population reliant on truckloads of grain from the south. And the war entrenched an attitude of suspicion towards the Kenyan government, a distrust of their continued efforts to develop the country’s northern borderlands – a mutual distrust, in fact, as the legacy of the Shifta War continues to inform Nairobi’s perception of the north as backwards, ignorant, unproductive and hostile.

*Gaf D’aba*, Dalle told me, finishing his summary of the conflict, was what the Borana called the Shifta War: “stop-time;” the years during which northern Kenyans were penned into drab concrete encampments, eating tasteless maize meal while their

livestock grew skinny to die on the stunted pastures and time stopped – time as marked by the arrival of the rains, the dry stretches in between, and the migrations that each season impelled.

Our discussions – on the Shifta War, writing, Marsabit gossip – generally took place in the hours before lunch. They were so packed with information that I often felt like a medieval scribe rushing to jot down what Dalle said, my mind contorting as I tried to compress the stories he told into the pages of my notebook.

After lunch, we would go for a walk around town. I felt like I was accompanying a hometown hero, a local celebrity, as Dalle stopped to shake hands and greet people on every block. He reminded me of a popular politician, but when I asked – sometimes seriously, other times teasingly – whether he would ever consider getting into politics, the answer was always a firm no. Politics would destroy his critical distance, it would corrupt him and make it impossible to trust him as a writer.

Politics, however, was on everyone's minds that year. It was election season. William Ruto was running against Raila Odinga and the race, two weeks before Kenyans cast their ballots and picked their next president, was a tight one. Ruto was the younger man, whose campaign promised an end to the political dynasties that ran Kenya and a “bottom-up” economic policy, one that would empower the poorest Kenyans – the “hustlers” that made up the “hustler nation” Ruto was appealing to. Raila was a grizzled politician. He had been imprisoned several times during the Moi years and since then, he had attempted to run for president three times. He had lost each one of those elections and if he lost this one it was unlikely he would run again.

Sitting in the parking lot of the Jey-Jey Centre – the red-brick waystation where I had stayed before joining Hachache and his crew on our journey to the borehole four years ago – Dalle and I chewed *khat* and discussed the election with his friends. Or, I should say, Dalle discussed it. They usually talked in Borana, which I didn't understand, so I watched their conversations, getting used to their rhythm. Plastic chairs scraped against the gravel as arguments forced men forward in their seats, buckling as they collapsed back into them after delivering a final, victorious point. Little piles of *khat* leaves accumulated around our feet like snowdrifts. Cigarettes were lit and smoked quickly.

Dalle was the star here, the most convincing. Sometimes writers describe a character as having “flashing eyes” when they want to indicate how passionately that character feels. It's a cliché, but Dalle's eyes really did flash when he talked during these sessions. It was impressive and a little fearsome. I tried to imagine myself with eyes blazing as I argued about politics with my friends in the states.

Besides the elections, the other thing on everyone's minds was the curfew. Earlier that year, Marsabit had been rocked by a spate of murders that escalated into all-out warfare between the Gabra and the Borana, the two groups that shared Mount Marsabit. The Kenyan army imposed a dawn-to-dusk curfew and conducted a disarmament operation in the area, but the peace was uneasy and even as a visitor, I noticed that the town's population seemed skittish, especially as night began to fall and army vehicles began patrolling the streets.

As Dalle explained it to me, the conflict was, at its heart, a political struggle: the Gabra sought to assert themselves as a political entity and in order to do so, had to

challenge Borana authority. The Gabra had the advantage of being the better fighters, who usually came out on top when they raided Borana camps in the flatlands. Tired of this dynamic, which had been exacerbated by a five-year drought, the Borana resorted to targeting the Gabra population of Marsabit town, pulling up on motorbikes and assassinating men they claimed were involved in raids. The murders were boldly executed and often took place in broad daylight. A year later I would be reminded of them in Lorokon and Kainuk, two towns that were far from Marsabit but were going through a similar crisis.

Despite my jokes about an eventual run for local MP, I understood that Marsabit politics were a dirty game, tinged by tribalism, laced with violence, and better left alone by Dalle. His writing was already inherently political. In it, he is adept at identifying the moments when history abruptly collides with personal experience. It was a quality I admired but didn't yet share with him; it took a perspicacity and a view of oneself as participating in history that Americans – myself among them – rarely possess, despite the outsize influence our country's politics have on the world. I like this moment in his story 'A Story of Marsabit: A Study of Home' published in *Adda* in 2016:

The market became another way of fighting out, ethnically contesting, one and other's place. Ethnicity overrode the market's construct, so that it silently harboured other biases beyond the forces of demand and supply. The market belonged to respective communities, Soko Gabra and Soko Burji. This market bias grew on me slowly. In 1998, when I was ten, I watched in fright as Rendile women selling milk were chased, their milk poured and milk gourds broken. In 2013, butchers threw out meat rotting in their butcheries because no one was buying it and women were caned in front of their husbands by hooded goons, for defying certain

caveats. In 2015, my brother's friend who at twenty-seven is looking to buy a piece of land to build a home, tells me how people asked who he was, secretly gauging if he represented the place he intended to buy.

He is describing a local market in the wake of a 2006 massacre of some sixty Gabra women and children by Borana gunmen in the village of Turbi, seventy-five miles north of Marsabit. This paragraph is a fine display of some of Dalle's talents as a writer. It's economical but not spare as he neatly distills nearly two decades of recent history into three sentences. His temporal shifts, with their measured rhythm, coolly chart the creeping progress of ethnic tension in Marsabit before he arrives at his final sentence, in which he makes clear how deeply land ownership and identity are intertwined in his hometown.

During those two weeks in Marsabit, at a point in my life when I felt sure of my sincere interest and affection for Kenya but increasingly unsure of my ability to translate those impulses into prose, overwhelmed by the sweep of its history and the intricacies of its politics, and frightfully aware of the delicacy required of me if I was going to write anything about this place, I often wondered what it was I wanted to say about the north. Lying under a floral-patterned duvet at night, I considered myself: twenty-two, with a slightly dramatic personality. When I thought about my future, a big question mark appeared. I was armed with a certain compulsion – one hammered into me by years of parentally enforced diary-keeping – to record. I had an affinity for northern Kenya, one that I knew my father would insist was a “love of place,” but where did that get me? I thought I knew a lot about the north until I met Dalle, who, I quickly realized, was more keenly aware than anyone else I knew of the region's contradictions, its inequities, its

history, the flows of people over its landscape, the divide between its natural riches and the poverty of its inhabitants. As an outsider I did not have his convictions or the same righteous anger in the face of injustice that he had. As a writer – and a northern Kenyan one to boot – Dalle had an enviable self-confidence that belied the difficulties of his chosen profession. He had forged his own path with an admirable doggedness. At thirty-four, he seemed to me a writer entering his mature period, having long ago escaped, if he ever experienced it, the self-doubt I felt so often. Greater acclaim, fame and awards, I was sure, lay ahead of him.

In early August I left Dalle and Marsabit, trading them for Stephen and Tuum. Before I left, I told Dalle about Stephen Cowan – the story of my meeting him, his mission in Tuum and his strange, obdurate, burning love for the place – and Dalle thought I should write about it. I spent ten days that year with Stephen, ten days I spent watching him more closely than I had before, trying to figure out how to pin him to a page. In January, in the middle of a frozen New England winter, the time of year when a day is only four hours long and everything has a desperate edge to it, I started writing about Stephen. Dalle was the first person I sent those pages to.

A few months after that, I asked Dalle if he wanted to go on a roadtrip with me. I was going to be in Kenya for two months and neither of us had been to the west side of Lake Turkana. I proposed that we make our way up there via a lazy, indirect route that would skirt the Maasai Mara, pass by Lake Victoria, and send us right through the Cherangani Hills before we reached Turkana County. We would split our costs and travel cheaply. He was game. In June, I landed in Nairobi and four days after that we set off on our road trip. It was the second stage of the Dalle Abraham Writer's Retreat, the practical stage, purposeful but with plenty of opportunities for detours and meanderings



where we would apply ourselves to the places we passed in hopes of getting down something true about them, recorded by me in my notebook and by Dalle in his Samsung Galaxy.

Paloma was the de facto manager, waitress and chef at the Caroly Resort, a dilapidated, melancholy hotel in Rongo. Despite her many duties, she was bored at the hotel and although the town's name, expressed phonetically, meant 'lie' in Kiswahili, it was a straightforward place, a stopping point for truckers and a market town surrounded by some of Kenya's most productive agricultural land. It was the second stop on our road trip.

"Pa-lo-ma," Dalle said, testing out her name. "Where is that name from? Your mother's or your father's side? You won't find 'Paloma' in the Bible..."

Dalle, I realized, could be super charming. It wasn't the unctuous, panting charm that men used when they were trying to get laid, nor was it like the ductile, patient charm that women sometimes turned on to deal with those men. It was a charm that sprung out of a real curiosity about other people, his true interest in their lives. Paloma told us that she was originally from Kisii and had two children, although their father was no longer in the picture. Her name, she said, was given to her by her mother.

Out on the hotel's lawn, four men sat chewing *khat* and drinking under an umbrella, the sky roiling darkly above them.

"My young son!" One of them called out in a booming, powerful voice. He beckoned to me. "My young son," he repeated. "Have a seat."

He was very dark and very drunk, moving with a drunkard's exaggerated slowness and deliberation as he filled his glass with vodka. His name was Armand.

“My young son,” he groaned again, stuffing *khat* leaves into his mouth.

“*Khat* is not vegetables,” one of his friends cautioned him, laughing.

“Aughhhhhhhh,” Armand replied. He had an immensely deep and resonant voice, like a bassline. It was pleasant to hear myself be called his young son in that voice.

“Paloma!” He roared. “Paloma!”

She appeared by his side. For a moment they looked like father and daughter before Armand dispelled that illusion by snaking his arm out and attempting to grab her ass. She batted him away.

“Paloma! Clear the table so that the table may be clear,” Armand instructed her, sweeping his arms over the bottles and *khat* leaves that littered the table.

One of the other men introduced himself to me and then launched into his story. His name was Mohammed and he was from Wajir in northeastern Kenya. He had been in the Kenyan Army until he was shot in the leg during a patrol in Somalia. Now, he told me, he wanted some peace and quiet. He wanted to buy a plot of land in Rongo and retire here. He rapidly enumerated the many good things about Rongo. There were decent schools, plenty of water, cheap land, and the people were friendly.

“That sounds great,” I said dully. Something about the quick explanation he had given me of himself was off.

Dalle had been listening in.

“Where did you say you were shot?” He asked Mohammed.

“Ah...honestly I can't remember where now, some village in the south of Somalia.”

It started to rain. Heavy raindrops clattered off the resort's tin roof like pennies. Dalle and I scurried inside.

“That *waria* guy is shifty,” Dalle said to me, referring to Mohammed. “He doesn’t remember where he was shot? Come on. I don’t buy it.”

We were sitting on a couch. Paloma sat opposite us, playing with a strand of her hair. A disco ball spun in slow circles, throwing blotches of color around the lobby. Old songs sung in Congolese Kiswahili played off the jukebox, roomy, jangly songs that swayed in and out of our hearing as the rain faltered and then picked up.

“Paloma, do you know how to dance?” Dalle asked her.

She shook her head. “I can’t dance.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“No, I really don’t know how.”

“Max can dance,” Dalle offered.

“I love dancing,” I said.

“He’ll dance if you dance,” Dalle said.

I nodded. She was smiling.

“Come on, Max, let’s dance.”

Dalle and I stood up and began to attach ourselves to the rhythm, trying to match its looseness and big simple melody with similarly-sized movements. We pushed out our shoulders and yanked them back, put one foot in front of the other and leaned on it, counting two beats before we stepped forward again; we swung our arms in little circles and bent our torsos over our feet. The song came to us in fragments through the rain and we strained to hear the beat, our steps hesitant and stumbling as we tried to imagine where the song was going when we couldn’t hear it.

Then Paloma joined our shuffle and for a few minutes we danced in a circle, each of us focused on our own particular rhythm, not speaking or laughing, dimly aware that

a teenager was egging us on from the bar, until the rain suddenly stopped and the song flooded into our ears and we realized that our steps were completely out of sync with its tune, like a bad translation, and we went back to the couch.

Six days later and a hundred miles away from Rongo, Shahid Adan walked into the Golf Hotel's dining room apologizing. He had been working late at his job in the Kakamega County Government office, where he was third-in-command and in charge of a budget of eight hundred million shillings. I studied him curiously because only a week ago, Dalle and I had gone out in Nairobi with his brother Abdul Adan. My curiosity was the commonplace curiosity of someone who imagines that shared traits between siblings have some special import; but I was especially curious because Abdul Adan was one of those immediately likable people, someone whose humor and intelligence was so irrepressible and propulsive that it made me want to write down everything he said. His writing was the same. He read Dalle and I an excerpt from his unfinished novel, a perverse, funny story that he read to us in a range of voices, expanding to emphasize some moment of comedy and then shrinking to a sly whisper as the narrative twisted. I wondered whether his brother shared the same off-kilter sense of humor with him, and what about their upbringing had engendered such a quality.

As far as physical similarities went, the two brothers were a study in contrasts. Abdul – jittery, riveting – was skinny, which suited him and his profession. Shahid was a larger man, not fat, but with a bulk that seemed appropriate when I considered the many millions of shillings that he managed. His skin was soft, his hair and beard recently trimmed, his nails cut and shaped; he exuded prosperity and well-being in the world.

He ordered plates of food which the waiters, in their vaguely colonial vests and white shirts, brought out covered in plastic wrap. Dalle and I hadn't done much but eat all day, but we attempted to put away as much as we could of the rice, chapatis, meat stews and fried fish that lay ensconced within curlicues of tomatoes artfully arranged around each plate's edges. Shahid seemed unbothered by our lack of appetite. He summoned a waiter and they cleared it away.

We walked out of the dining room and onto a lawn. A few guests were sitting around a cordoned-off pool, engaged in what appeared to be difficult, serious conversations, speaking in low tones and studying each other's faces searchingly after every sentence. The hotel looked as if it was occupied solely by couples who were breaking up.

A somber group of Americans sat behind us at the bar. The bartender told me that they had just finished a service trip to Kakamega; from the snatches of conversation that floated my way, it sounded like they were having a final wrap-up of their experience.

"You can't just have answers for five seconds," one teenager said.

"...And suddenly, it's like, I'm the minority."

"No one gives a shit about you," an older bearded man concluded vehemently.

Their service trip did not sound like it had been a happy one, or perhaps they were just signaling a dissatisfaction they imagined they should feel at the end of a well-digging and road-laying trip to Africa. I turned back to Dalle and Shahid, who were talking about Abdul.

"Have you read what he's written lately?" Dalle asked Shahid.

"I've read a few things, but not recently, no."

“Have you read that one called ‘The Curious Case of Rupert Roo’?”

“Ah, yes. It’s a case study, one of his case studies.”

Abdul wrote fictional case studies about strange people. One of them, ‘The Lifebloom Gift,’ about a man whose sense of touch is so acute that it renders anything he can’t touch nonexistent, was shortlisted for the Caine Prize.

“Yeah, that one,” Dalle said.

“It was good. A case study... All of the writing is sort of a case study.”

Dalle laughed.

“When he came to Marsabit, it was good because he would write five hundred or one thousand words a day and then we could talk about it. I think if he had another month or two without distraction, he could finish his novel.”

Shahid nodded.

“I think he has to go back to America soon, in August or September, for his passport.”

I remembered that Abdul was an American citizen and therefore had to leave Kenya every so often for that reason.

“No, bro,” Dalle shook his head. “He needs to finish this book. It’s the most important thing right now for Abdul – no, for the world! – to have this book finished.”

Dalle was leaning forward, looking intently at Shahid. He was being utterly persuasive. In that moment, I believed that the entire future of literature rested with Abdul and his novel. I nodded eagerly.

“It’s really good,” I told Shahid.

“Do you think that this book can have the potential to be a best-seller?” Shahid asked.

“Absolutely! Flying off the shelves. Critically acclaimed. Best-of lists,” Dalle said, his voice rising.

Shahid appeared satisfied by this. He turned a packet of cigarettes over in his hand. Him and his brother, I noticed, shared a smoking habit.

“That’s good. Ok. Maybe his trip can be postponed.”

He finished his beer and stood up. We shook hands and thanked him for dinner before he glided out into the night, leaving a perfumed wake behind him. A few minutes later, as Dalle and I were playing pool, Dalle’s phone buzzed: Shahid had sent him ten thousand shillings, “for the night.”

After seven hundred miles together, we were coming to the end of our road trip. Dalle’s wife missed him, she said on the phone, and the neighbors were beginning to wonder what kind of absent husband she had. It was time for him to come home. Lodwar, Dalle decided, would be his last stop. He would go back to Marsabit, leaving me to continue solo.

In Kainuk, we waited for a ride to Lodwar. It was a waiting place, bisected by a brand-new road that made the town look scruffier by comparison. The army was conducting a special operation in the area to stamp out banditry. They had imposed a dawn-to-dusk curfew and Kainuk had that same tense, shuttered atmosphere I had noticed last year in Marsabit.

“What’s there to do here?” I asked a young guy lounging on the side of the road.

“Drink and chew,” he said.

After an hour, a white Toyota stopped and we were ushered over to it. The driver was a large, jovial man whose head was set far back on his shoulders and who seemed to

be in a state of perpetual amusement. His name was Anthony and he worked in the solar energy business.

“The other day on Thika Road, these protesters started throwing rocks at us and we had to abandon that road!” He recounted as we sped away from Kainuk, his body shaking silently with laughter.

There were two other passengers in the car. One was a quiet, birdlike woman named Esther and the other a man named Jason, who sat in the passenger seat alongside Anthony and seemed to have some prior friendship with him. Anthony asked the usual questions – where were we from, what did we do for work, where were we going – of us. Dalle told him that he was a writer interested in pastoralism.

“Ah, pastoralism,” Anthony said. “Pastoralism is not a viable way of life.”

As he said that, I turned to look at Dalle. He had leaned forward in his seat and had already raised a hand in the air, as if he was an impatient student frustrated with his teacher’s lecture.

“What do you mean, pastoralism is not a viable way of life? It is maybe the most viable, more viable than what we do. Pastoralism will still be practiced long after we are gone.”

“I mean, what percentage of these livestock around us” – Anthony pointed at some goats grazing in the scrub – “will enter the national abattoirs? Or is sold commercially? What do they contribute to Kenya’s GDP?”

“A lot! So much! I would even say seventy or eighty percent of these livestock go to the national market!”

“Really?” Anthony said.



“Yeah! Look: The other day we were at a market in Lomut, in West Pokot. What was the main product being bought and sold there?”

“Cows,” Jason piped up helpfully.

“Exactly! We saw maybe thirteen, fourteen hundred head of cattle being led away from that market. Think about it. All the meat that is eaten in Nairobi, in Kiambu, in Kikuyu, in Murang'a, in Nakuru, all these places, comes from pastoral areas!”

“Ok, ok.” Anthony said. “I think some years ago, we did a study in this area where we asked pastoralists what percentage of their livestock was entering the national markets and they said only a small amount. But,” he added hastily, “I think we got some wrong numbers from them.”

“The problem is,” Dalle continued, “that the infrastructure is lacking here. We have the same problem in Marsabit. If you want to sell your livestock in Kainuk, where do you have to go?”

“Eldoret,” Jason said.

“Eldoret! You see? There’s no markets, there’s no this, no that. This is the challenge. Between Turkana County and Marsabit County, that’s nearly thirty percent of Kenya’s landmass. And still the government has only just yesterday started setting up local markets for livestock and building abattoirs in these regions.”

“Yes, yes,” Anthony murmured.

He overtook a *kifaru* – a tall armored vehicle. Soldiers waved to us from the turret, wilting bucket hats hiding their eyes. The conversation turned to the special operation and the insecurity plaguing the area.

“Did you know,” Anthony said, “that the army has been using drones to surveil to look for bandits?”

“Drones?” I repeated.

“Drones!” Esther exclaimed, speaking up for the first time. “They fly over my village every day.” She imitated the buzzing sound of a drone.

I wondered when the English word *drone* had entered her vocabulary. I could picture them whirring overhead – four-rotored, matte-black, insectile, cradling a swiveling camera beneath their thoraxes. They made the north, which for so long had loomed large in my imagination, feel smaller. One was probably above us right now, transmitting our Rav4’s progress up the black stripe of the highway to a monitor in a nearby army camp, where a soldier would squint at the flattened landscape on the little display before directing the drone further afield to survey the hills and *luggas* and little villages that remained invisible to us from the car.

Anthony dropped us off in Lodwar and Dalle and I said goodbye to each other the next day. I kept traveling, continuing further north to Kakuma and Lokichogio and then west to Lokirama before going back south to revisit Marich. I tried to keep Dalle’s example in mind as I shuttled around on my own. I wanted to be curious yet skeptical, easygoing while understanding where the limits of my ease lay and critical – of myself, the places I visited and my experiences there – but never mean-spirited. As I traveled, I kept on writing and when I did, I pictured Dalle reading what I wrote.

Yet even as I moved around, I kept returning to those three episodes from our time together on the road. The first, with Paloma in Rongo, was a sweet memory. The next, at the Golf Hotel with Shahid, was inspiring. And in the car, I had felt like I was flipping through a picture book as Dalle and Anthony talked, the themes of their discussion – violence, pastoralism, and the consequences of the Kenyan government’s

apathy regarding northern Kenya – helpfully illustrated by examples fleetingly visible from the backseat window as we raced up the highway.

I found it difficult, even as I wrote about new encounters and new places, to get these episodes down in writing. I tried to imagine them as a movie: what impression would someone watching it get of Dalle? Would his intelligence and charm come through, or would his belief in the importance of Abdul’s writing be as inspiring to the moviegoer as it had been to me? Would the movie’s chapters cohere, like steel plates sliding into place, and form a three-sided portrait of Dalle as I knew him during the two weeks we traveled together?

I think that I imagined these pieces of our road trip projected on the big screen because it seemed so clear to me that lots of people should know who Dalle is and read what he has written. Around him, I felt like a little kid watching his older cousin do a backflip into a pool – super impressed, star-struck, envious. I wanted to be able to do one; but even as I watched him launch himself into the air, I lost track of his movements and what he executed so effortlessly became a blur and then a splash, leaving me with the slow-dawning knowledge that what was left for me to do was practice: just keep running and jumping, throwing myself into the pool over and over again.

## Akidor

Kakuma is an unpromising place name, especially for a refugee camp. I couldn't find out what it meant, unlike Lodwar, from where I was coming and whose name is one of those catchy colonial misappellations. *Edwar* is the Turkana name for a bitter wild fruit that requires a lot of boiling and pounding and reboiling before it is palatable. A British surveyor, arriving at present-day Lodwar, encountered a group of Turkana preparing *Edwar* and asked them what they called this place. They thought he was asking what they were making and told him *Edwar*. The officer heard *Lodwar* and some 120 years later, Lodwar is the largest town in Turkana County, a small city that reminded me of a pair of too-big shoes bought in the hopes one will grow into them. The streets are wider than the traffic they host and extend in orderly lines far beyond Lodwar's current limits. But in a few years Lodwar will catch up; it's already in the midst of a growth spurt. Neighborhoods will begin germinating along the outlying roads and the traffic will become three-lane worthy.

But back to Kakuma and its name. With or without meaning, its phonic proximity to *kaka* and its curt procession of syllables (KAA - KU - MA, emphasis on the first A) conjures up an image of somewhere squat and squalid. From afar, though, Kakuma looked like a pool of mercury floating atop the dry surrounding plains. Every structure in the camp is built of sheets of corrugated iron, so from the highway that shoots over the desert into Kakuma, the entire conurbation radiates brilliant platinum-white light.

*Why is this camp here?* I wondered as I stepped out of the minivan and onto Kakuma's main street. Answers to my question came to mind immediately: nearness to conflict sites in South Sudan and Ethiopia, its relative and convenient isolation from the

rest of the country (Kakuma is located in an extremely arid corner of northwestern Kenya, at least two days by road from Nairobi) – but I suppose the question of *why?* wasn't really one that stemmed from any legitimate and naive curiosity about the camp's location, but my incredulity that this inhospitable place could even begin to support 400,000 people. At noon, the sun had a pummeling force to it, as if determined to beat you to the ground. Miniature dust storms thrashed themselves into a frenzy up and down the street. And I knew that at most, it only rained here two or three times a year.

I'd been sitting in the front seat of the Probox – a Toyota sedan retrofitted to accommodate about a dozen passengers – that brought me here and had enjoyed talking to the driver, a raspy-voiced man named Samuel. When we got to Kakuma, he offered to show me around in exchange for gas money. I agreed because I didn't feel like making a go of the camp alone and because Samuel's company on the drive here had been pleasant and informative. We recruited another guy about my age named Patrick to accompany us and off we went.

I'd never been to a refugee camp before and had an image in my mind of a place heavily guarded, its only entrance a large metal gate patrolled by surly soldiers who would demand to see our papers and conduct an extensive search of the car. But there was nothing of the sort here. Instead, the tarmacked road disintegrated into a dirt one and then we were in the camp – Kakuma 1, the first camp built here. There was hardly even a *You Are Now Entering Kakuma* sign on the roadside.

Kakuma is divided into two parts. There's Kakuma town, a busy Kenyan roadside place, and then there's the refugee camp, which lies a few kilometers up the road. The

camp is further divided into four zones, plus a newly constructed settlement called Kalobeyei.

As noticed from the car, every building in the camp was made of corrugated iron and every single one of these corrugated iron buildings seemed to be a shop. The amount of people buying and selling things – pots and pans, used clothes, fruit and vegetables, chickens, plastic tarps, machine parts – surprised me. The entire camp, which I had envisioned as a rather desperate place, actually seemed to be a gigantic open-air market, home to a variety of commerce and thick with vendors transacting business. When I voiced my surprise to Patrick and Samuel, they just nodded.

“This place is rich,” Samuel said as we passed a group of people unloading glistening cabbages from a truck.

“Fruit, vegetables, food – it all comes from Kitale, every day.” Patrick added, a trace of contempt in his voice. It was clear that the constant flow of aid money and food into Kakuma was something of a sore spot for those who lived in the other Kakuma, the Kenyan town just down the road.

Our tour of Kakuma quickly dissolved into a lesson on the practical application of physiognomy as used to identify the ethnic origins of various refugees that we saw as we drove.

“Sudanese here.”

“That guy – *Waria* (Somali).”

“Look over there, those people sitting. Congolese.”

“Dinka people live on this street.”

“Nuer over there.”

“This is the Ethiopian area. See? They’re lighter.”

At first, I wondered if there was some code they were interpreting that I could not understand.

“How can you tell?” I asked.

“Faces! And their colors,” Samuel replied merrily. Each refugee group lived in their own ethnic enclave, with apparently little mixing between different groups or the surrounding Kenyan population – something that I found hard to believe, but was apparently enforced by law.

“If a Kenyan gets a refugee pregnant, he’ll be arrested,” Samuel said, grimacing and bringing his wrists together to mime handcuffs being placed on them. Ostensibly this rule existed to prevent any refugee’s full assimilation into the Kenyan citizenry. I asked Patrick if he, a born Kenyan Kakumian local, had ever had a romance with a refugee. (*Romance with a Refugee*, I thought, the shiny cover of some airport-bookstore treacle suggesting itself in my mind). Patrick said he had, with a Somali girl.

“She went to Canada, though. She left.” He said matter-of-factly.

We passed from the Ethiopian section and into the Sudanese section of Kakuma 1 without my noticing any marked difference between the two. I wondered if each section's stubborn sameness – a sameness created by the limited range of building materials supplied by the UN and various NGO groups – was purposeful, an attempt to erode any ideas about national or ethnic differentiation that could be meaningfully expressed through architecture. Yet even if that was the case, certain camp-dwellers had managed to use the materials provided them in aesthetically pleasing and distinctive ways. The Ugandan houses, for instance, all had steep-sided triangular roofs whose construction looked quite elegant and made the houses seem more permanent.

As we drove deeper into the camp, through Kakuma 1 and 2 and then into Kakuma 3, it became starkly apparent the camp was almost explicitly divided along communal lines and that there was a clear hierarchy of ethnicities with Kakuma. Somalis, Patrick said, were the easiest to get along with.

“If you stay with them for a few years, you can even join them, especially if you learn their language.”

I thought this was a clever adaptation of the Somali *Sheegad* system to the camp environment. *Sheegad* is a policy by which non-Somalis could historically be absorbed into the Somali clan system, usually as vassals of a larger clan but with the possibility of full assimilation remaining open. It is part of the reason for Somalis’ success as pastoralists and traders across the Horn of Africa, and here, as in history, it seemed to be working to their benefit.

The South Sudanese, on the other hand, were the most difficult to coexist with.

“Violence,” Samuel said when I asked why. “They’re always fighting.”

Later that evening, at the Tarach Guest House, I talked to a young woman named Chess. “I normally carry a board with me,” she explained when I asked about her name.

“The Sudanese always fight.” She said. “It’s like it’s in their blood. They fight about anything.”

Perhaps all the violence in their home country, Chess theorized, had seeped into their bodies, so much so that now fighting was encoded within their DNA and passed down from parents to their children.

I met a group of South Sudanese soccer players as they waited for a ride to their next match. Their team was called ‘Gold Star’ and they were playing against a Somali team; the soccer pitch, then, was an acceptable place to vent any violent or



ethno-nationalistic feeling, something that soccer does well and which I felt lent the World Cup its drama.

The soccer players were all tall, which is something you hear often about South Sudanese people, and pretty reserved. Most of them came to Kakuma from South Sudan in 2014 from the Lakes State. Life in Kakuma was just fine, they agreed. They just wanted someone with an adequate camera to film their soccer matches.

But they had a bad rap, it was undeniable. About twenty minutes later, we talked to a young Congolese man who told us to call him K2. He had a beatific smile and his beard was impeccably shaped and oiled.

“The Sudanese steal Congolese babies,” he said, sounding aggrieved.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because they like our color and want to raise the babies as their own and then their own color will be lighter.”

This seemed an outrageous rumor. Although it was definitely true that K2 himself was of a lighter complexion than the Sudanese we had just met, the story sounded suspiciously like some old wives tale, designed to frighten children into obedience with visions of a Sudanese bogeyman.

I asked Chess about the veracity of that story. Chess – who works in the camp as a “data collector” – simply said that there are many stories in Kakuma, and then proceeded to tell me a horrific one about a woman who had a forced and unanesthetized C-section performed on her by South Sudanese soldiers before she came to Kakuma.

“And now she can’t sleep at night, she has terrible dreams.” Chess finished.

Kakuma's Congolese refugees don't exactly have a pristine reputation either. Sixty-five miles to the north, in the sleepy border town of Lokichogio, an aspiring comedian named Cindy told me that the Congolese are adept at *uchawwi*, or black magic. Earlier that day as I waited at the bus stop in Kakuma, a man sauntered up to me and handed me a scrap of paper on which he'd written TERRY followed by a series of indecipherable scribbles. He was tall and looked like he was all muscle and he was visibly deranged. Cindy said that that man – whose name, as the paper had announced, was Terry – was from Lokichogio and had got rich prospecting for gold. He'd hidden the gold, or sold it and put the money into an account – the details were unclear. Then he and a group of his friends had stolen something from the Congolese section of Kakuma and although she wasn't sure exactly what he had stolen, it had so pissed off the Congolese that they cursed him to become homeless and mentally ill and lose, forever, access to his fortune.

“These Congolese people are disturbed,” Cindy concluded, dismissing them with a wave of her hand. They were also, according to Patrick, the best barbers in Kakuma. But it seemed to me that allegations of black magic as performed by the Congolese might just be an easy metaphor for any trauma expressed or visible to Kakuma's non-refugee population by refugees in the camp.

There is a strong xenophobic streak among Lokichogio's population. People there speak with a mixture of resentment, disbelief and some jealousy about the convoys of refugees that pass through their town, fleeing conflicts in South Sudan. Or they curse William Ruto, Kenya's president, for allocating resources and money to the refugees while neglecting Turkana County, Kenya's second-poorest county and the location of both Lokichogio and Kakuma. Why don't the NGOs, the UN, help us, Paul, a

nineteen-year old, asked me over beers at the Makuti Bar, a faded establishment on Lokichogio's main street that was clearly built during the town's boom, when it was the supply point for NGOs working in South Sudan during the early 2000s.

Those NGOs decamped to Kakuma after 2008, leaving Lokichogio with an empty handful of guesthouses and bars, full of bored staff awaiting the return of their former clientele. "*Lazima* – they must come back," a bartender named Jacob assured me. "Something happens in Sudan, they'll come back again." It felt odd and sad to hear that, because what Jacob and others like him were depending on was the recommencement of conflict in South Sudan, something inevitable given what they saw as the South Sudanese predilection for violence.

But until then Lokichogio remains quiet, a husk of the town it was fifteen years ago. There aren't many cars there and at night people walk along the darkened tarmac, holding hands. There are solar street lights lining the avenues, but they don't work. Thieves shimmied up the poles and stole the solar panels. Kakuma, meanwhile, continues to grow. As felt in Lokichogio, its presence is nearly magnetic. People are constantly going there from Lokichogio, although they take every opportunity to say how much nicer Loki is compared to Kakuma's heat and dust and hustle. There's work there, and maybe a sense of life that Loki lacks.

Yet Lokichogio has its champion, in the unlikely form of a thirty-year old singer and producer known as MC Chacha. On an airless Saturday, I accompanied Chacha and his manager to the village of Nanam, where they hoped to recruit actors to be in the music video for "Akidor," Chacha's latest release and biggest hit to date. Chacha and Lokai – his manager – were waiting for me at the bar of the guesthouse where I was

staying. Chacha was slumped against the countertop in a red turtleneck and shredded jeans, idly thumbing through his phone. He was of medium height and wore his braids pulled back in a tight ponytail. He had on Rayban Wayfarers and a thick silver chain – the signifiers, I felt, of his status as a local musician.

This was my first time meeting Chacha. The day before, while using the pool to escape the heat at one of Lokichogio's derelict resorts, I'd met Lokai, who was there with his friend Joffrey. They had just completed an NGO-funded training on gender-based violence and were celebrating with a poolside lunch. Lokai was tall and slender, handsome in a rangy way, given to serious, prolonged eye contact. Joffrey was shorter and much more effusive. Both were unstintingly sincere. Immediately after we'd been introduced, Joffrey whipped out his phone and started recording a video of us:

"I'm here in Lokichogio with my good friend Max and uh, we have just, he has just given me an idea for how to stop gender-based violence...so that's what we're doing here! Let's work together to solve this problem."

I had no idea how to solve gender-based violence, but Joffrey's brio was infectious. Perhaps, I thought, we were practicing positive manifestation: if we said we had the solution to gender-based violence with enough confidence, then maybe a solution would actually come to us. But Joffrey was serious. He turned to me:

"So, I think we can start a group to combat gender-based violence in this area. How do you see it? It's really a big problem. And we need someone to be a sponsor, someone who can find people with money to give to us so that we can do this work. You're from America, maybe you can give us some support – even from there, when you go back! You can just tell people about our work, and find us funding."

“I can try,” I said, trying to match his enthusiasm. “I don’t know very many wealthy people, but it sounds like you have a plan. I would be happy to support it however I can.”

Lokai interrupted us and asked Joffrey for a minute of my time. Joffrey deferred to him.

“We’ll talk later, Max,” he promised.

Lokai explained that he was the manager of a few local artists – MC Chacha foremost among them – and if I was free tomorrow, I should go with him and Chacha to Nanam.

“Have you heard of Chacha?” He asked me.

I had, actually. A week ago, a friend of mine from a different part of northern Kenya had posted a screenshot of Chacha’s “Akidor” on his Whatsapp story with the caption “best turkana musician.” I’d noted the post and now, in hindsight, it seemed oddly perfect that I was to meet Chacha himself.

“You’re a visitor here in Lokichogio and it would be a good experience,” Lokai said.

There was something implicit within his statement that worried me slightly, especially after Joffrey’s proposal that I become the American liaison for a group in Loki working to combat gender-based violence. I guessed that as an American visitor, Lokai thought I might confer some status upon Chacha’s budding career, when in reality I was a college student and quite sure of my lowly position on the totem pole of American society. I forced myself to shelve this worry, telling myself that it didn’t have much valence here anyways. In fact, it was flattering of Lokai and Joffrey to assume I

commanded some influence back in the States and even if I didn't, it was something to aspire towards. I readily accepted Lokai's invitation.

Chacha drove fast. We left Lokichogio behind and cut across the Lotikipi Plains, dull-green grasslands speckled with livestock and the thatch domes of herders' bomas. In 2013, a vast aquifer was discovered underneath the plains. People rejoiced. There was enough water to satisfy Turkana County's needs for a hundred years. Everyone would have access to fresh, clean water and this great stark landscape would be transformed into a well-irrigated agricultural powerhouse, Kenya's new breadbasket. But in a horrible reversal of fortune, initial tests of the aquifer revealed that the water was saline, unfit for human consumption and useless for agriculture.

We got to Nanam at midday. It was a village of about twenty huts and a school ringed around a spigot. A line of men and some teenage girls were awaiting us in the shade of an acacia.

Chairs were brought out for us. A seemingly autistic and very drunk woman was taking swigs from a fifth of vodka. She tried to stand up to greet us and toppled over into the thorns behind her. She was ushered off into the nearest hut.

As we waited for more men to arrive, I asked Chacha about himself. How, I wanted to know, had he been introduced to music? His family, he told me, had been a devout, church-going one.

"My mother was a singer; she led the choir at church. I was singing from when I was five years old." Chacha said.

Ten years ago, finished with school and suddenly aimless, he started recording his own songs, posting shaky videos on Youtube and making free downloads available

on sites like deezer and smubuafrica.com. Over the course of five years, Chacha slowly gained a fan base and professional momentum. At this point, I realized that anyone who remembers Justin Bieber’s meteoric rise to fame in the early 2010s, or who is familiar with the careers of great American soul singers like Al Green and Marvin Gaye will recognize within their trajectories a counterpart in Chacha’s own. Al Green and Marvin Gaye both honed their voices singing in choirs and the secular music they made during their careers – especially Gaye’s, whose music often seems less interested in the love’s corporeal manifestations than it is in love as a conduit to some supremely transcendent state – bears the imprint of those early years spent belting out songs of praise and worship every Sunday. And like Justin Bieber, who was discovered by a keen-eyed agent on Youtube, Chacha owes much of his success to the internet and its easy adoption by his audience. On platforms like Spotify, his streaming numbers are negligible. But this is because most people in Turkana County don’t use streaming services: They download MP3s onto their cell phones where they can be replayed over and over again, unbeknownst to any data harvesters.

However, it wasn’t until 2018 that his career really began to take off.

“I started off with singing in English and Kiswahili,” he said, “but then I decided I should sing in Turkana. And since then!” – he shook his head in disbelief and laughed – “the support has been incredible. My music has done a lot better.”

As we talked, I noticed that he used the English word “cultural” often. He used it as a descriptor of his music as a genre – Chacha makes cultural music in the same way that Dua Lipa makes slightly retro disco-inspired pop music – but I realized that his music is “cultural” in the sense that it is simply about Turkana culture. “Akidor,” for

example, has relatively basic instrumentation, borrowing from an Afrobeats palette originally devised by Nigerian singers and producers. However, the song's lyrics have to do with a romantic vision of Turkana culture and specifically Turkana pastoral culture as it lives within the memory of Chacha and his peers. It even begins with Chacha exultantly shouting "*Ateker cluster!*" When I asked him about this adlib, he nodded vigorously.

"We're Ateker people," he said, gesturing around us. "It's like – we have one language, with Toposa and Karamojong, and our culture is the same."

This was true. The Ateker cluster refers to a group of about eight different ethnic groups that share related languages and similar cultures. The Turkana, Toposa, Jie, Karamojong and Nyangatom live in a loose triangle that covers northwestern Kenya, South Sudan, southwestern Ethiopia and western Uganda while the Teso, Kumam and Lango live more distantly in Uganda. Sometime in the semi-mythic past, the Ateker forefathers left their homeland in South Sudan and began to move into present-day northern Uganda and Kenya. The Turkana say that they split off from the other Ateker groups when a gray bull, *engiro*, was lost. Eight young men were sent to recover the bull. They descended the escarpment that now marks the border between Kenya and Uganda and found themselves in a hotter, drier country. There they discovered the gray bull living with an old woman called Nayece, who welcomed them by lighting a fire and showing them around the area. They found it to their liking, so they collected their women and cattle and returned to the new territory, where they settled and became the Turkana.



Chacha and Lokai tactfully insisted on the cross-border unity of the Ateker groups, their shared origin in South Sudan and common love for and reliance on cattle.

“I feel at home if I go to South Sudan, I feel at home in Uganda or Ethiopia. It’s peaceful; we all speak the same language,” he said.

Then why, I wanted to know, was there so much fighting between the different Ateker groups? It seemed to me that the Turkana were especially hard-pressed, with conflicts simmering on several fronts with at least three different Ateker groups.

“It’s just little stuff,” Lokai interjected when I asked about this. “Livestock, land.”

“Those seem pretty important,” I said.

“It’s a problem,” Chacha agreed. “But we’re still one people.”

Chacha’s decision to sing in Turkana and brand himself as an explicitly Ateker artist, one who consistently affirms the existence of Ateker peoples as one solid bloc despite the Ateker-on-Ateker violence pervasive along Kenya’s northern borderlands, has been a very successful marketing strategy. He now performs regularly at “cultural festivals” across the Ateker zone. Just two days ago he went to Kapoeta in South Sudan. In the video he showed me of that performance, he’s singing and twirling around an amphitheater, until the crowd gets off their feet and floods the sandy stage, dancing and singing along with him.

Chacha, however, wouldn’t admit to there having been some strategic about-face in his career. “I just wanted to sing in Turkana,” he said to me modestly, sweeping his braids out of his eyes.

And sing, in Turkana, he does. I was curious about what Chacha was saying in the song and asked him to translate some of his lyrics into English. It begins with Chacha extolling Akidor's virtues.

*Akidor angatuk aka*

*Musuguta nyamoiti kanagaah*

*Akidor angakinei ata*

*Lokwapon aakosi koneeh*

Akidor of cows

My white woman, my foreign

person

Akidor, a strong woman,

The mother of Lokwapon, my

heart friend

“My white woman?” I asked Chacha, confused. He explained that although Akidor was not actually white, she was so beautiful and desirable to him that she became, metaphorically, a white woman. White women, he elaborated, held an exalted place in his heart. The song goes on:

*Kerupuuh...*

*Ikokua angimonia*

*Kejokeer, kesiani Akidor*

Beautiful girl

The daughter of *ngimonia*

No other girl compares to Akidor

*Kerupuuh...*

*Ikokua ngijieh*

*Kejokeer, kesiani Akidor*

Beautiful girl

The daughter of Jie

No other girl compares to you

*Ngimonia* is one of the two main Turkana clans and the Jie are an Ateker group that lives primarily in Uganda. Although the exact details of her genealogy are unclear, Akidor belongs to both groups and in his song, Chacha is singing about a relationship that spans a border and several ethnic affiliations, promoting – through an advantageous marriage – the Ateker unity he was so quick to stress as the intention behind his music. Yet the concept for the music video would, he told me, include a fight scene between Akidor’s brothers, enraged by their sister’s elopement with Chacha, and Chacha’s own family. I asked him about this detail of the plot.

“It’s not really accepted,” he said, referring to elopement, “but it kinda is and it happens sometimes.” The fighting that would take place in the music video had more to do with Akidor’s family defending their honor rather than making a serious attempt to get her back. In that kind of situation, Chacha said, the two families would meet after tempers had cooled and arrange an appropriate dowry to be paid to Akidor’s family. Peace would be restored through the appropriate and customary cultural avenues and a lifetime of marital bliss ensue.

After Chacha finished talking, Lokai called me up to the front of the crowd. I thanked them for being here and said that I thought it was important that they participate in Chacha’s video as a way of preserving Turkana culture. I wasn’t sure if this was true, but before I had begun talking, Lokai whispered to me that I should add that in.

On the way back to Loki, we blasted “Akidor” from the motorbike’s speakers, the song sounding small and tinny against the big lightsome landscape. Lokai and Chacha dropped me off and told me they would be back tomorrow morning to get me.

“We shoot at nine,” they shouted to me before zooming off.

They didn't come to collect me until four. By then the heat was less and a little breeze had sprung up. The evening light, which I loved in Loki, was beginning to climb up from the horizon, feathery and inviting bands of orange and pink, gray and purple. Lokai strode into the bar flanked by a posse, all outfitted in their most cultural Turkana finery.

“Let's go,” he said decisively. He explained that Chacha was already at the shoot and we were running a bit late.

We crammed into a Probox and drove out of town until we reached the base of a butte that rose above the road maybe four or five hundred feet and was studded in places with sooty boulders. A narrow path led to the top, where we would be filming.

Chacha was leaning against his motorbike, looking unbothered as a crowd milled about him. He wore a piece of beaded headgear and blue-and-white striped stockings that stretched to his knees. I hopped out of the car and dapped him up.

Chacha studied me. “You don't look ready,” he declared. He looked around and shouted at a couple young men.

They hustled over to us and immediately a shuka was draped over my shoulders and beads descended around my neck. A staff and the customary Turkana stool were thrust into my hands, an army-green bucket hat tilted at a snappy angle on my head; finally, I felt a pair of hands slip around my feet and slide my cheap flip-flops off, replacing them with a pair of the usual sandals made from car tires. I felt heavy and constrained in several ways that were critical to my freedom of movement. Joffrey materialized alongside me and snapped a selfie. “Turkana style!” he exclaimed as he did.

Transformation complete, we started climbing up the hill. This proved difficult. I watched as several people, carrying too much, slipped and rolled down the hill, frantically running in place to maintain their footing before the ground gave way and they slid down the slope.

Chacha and his entourage had somehow beat me to the top and were inspecting the steadicam they would be using to film. A case of Smirnoff Ice was perched photogenically atop a boulder, as if I'd walked into a liquor commercial.

Gradually, people hauled themselves onto the summit and after a critical mass had arrived, the director rather begrudgingly dragged the woman who was playing Akidor into position alongside Chacha. But he wasn't ready to shoot yet; the light wasn't right and first – we needed photo ops. A vast swath of my phone's camera roll – six hundred pictures, about ten of them taken by myself – consists completely of photos from that day.

“Max! *Kuja!* Let's take a pic.”

“Hey Maxi, that guy wants a picture.”

“Maaax.” Three women cried plaintively after me as I hobbled between picture-takers. I held up a finger weakly.

“Bro, come take one with me. Hold this:” An AK-47 was pushed into my hands. The camera clicked.

“Another photo with me, Maxi,” Joffrey said, tugging on my shuka.

“Maaaaax.” Those women were still waiting for me.

“Max! Take one here with Chacha's sister. Hey Elphima! *Kuja hapa.*”

“Hi,” I said to Elphima. She was very pretty.

“Maaaaaaaax.” Those women’s voices had risen to an undeniable pitch. I had to go take one with them and then I would come back.

“Just a minute,” I told Elphima mournfully.

It wasn’t a photo that the women wanted but a cameo in their Tiktok, set to “Akidor.” We did one, but they didn’t like it, so we did another with the dog filter on it. *Was the dog filter ever supposed to be cute?* I wondered as I caught a glimpse of myself cartoonishly animalized with lolling canine tongue and droopy dog ears.

“Max! Elphima wants her picture.” It was Lokai, shouting at me from across the hilltop. I could see Elphima smiling winsomely at me.

“Coming!” I said and I pushed off from the Tiktokkers. Stumbling across the scree-littered ground and burdened with various Turkana accoutrement, I felt a bit like a walking curio shop.

Suddenly I heard Chacha’s voice yelling after me.

“Max, let’s shoot!”

I swiveled, my beads clattering mockingly and reminding me of how ridiculous I looked. Chacha gazed at me expectantly, along with his cameramen and backup dancers. *I guess it’s time for my close-up*, I thought. I winced at Elphima in what I hoped came across as a raffish grin and waddled off towards Chacha.

The director grabbed my shoulders and steered me in between Chacha and Lokai.

“When I say action – dance! Like this.” He jumped straight up and down and made circles in the air with his elbows.

That was doable. I nodded and gave a thumbs-up.

“Action!” He screamed.

“Akidor” came booming out of a massive speaker and we started jumping. The director hopped around us with the steadicam. I tried not to feel self-conscious in front of the camera, telling myself to imitate Chacha and Lokai who were confidently jumping and lip singing the lyrics. I like dancing, but I could tell I was doing a bad job at it because behind the camera, two men snapped their fingers to get my attention. Do *this*, they mouthed, and demonstrated a move that required me to fold up my arms at the elbows and then pop them forward. Doing this made me feel like a large and cumbersome praying mantis.

“Akidor” was a longer song than I remembered and I tried to keep jumping smilingly but I was aware of a certain grimacing expression that crossed my face whenever my concentration slipped and an unflattering torrent of sweat surfing down my forehead. *Fix it in post*, I hoped.

Finally it was over and I was dismissed. Chacha moved on to another scene. I sat down and took off some of my gear. People settled around me and took more pictures, pressing props – a gun, a bottle of vodka, a small child – into my hands. As I readied myself for another photo, a jagged, blistering series of small explosions split open the air, right next to me, way too close. I threw myself to the ground, vaguely aware of everyone else doing the same. For a second and a half, I thought that a Toposa raiding party had discovered us and this was the end. I hadn’t ever been so close to gunshots and they were so unexpected and viscerally alarming that in the moment, all I could imagine was my body mangled by bullets and lying grossly deformed on the rocks.

But it was friendly fire. They were filming the battle scene.

‘It’s ok! Everyone get up!’ Someone yelled.

“You were scared,” a man standing next to me commented pointlessly.

“Of course,” I said. “So were you.”

He shook his head. “No. We’re used to this. I wasn’t scared.”

But he was lying. I’d seen him out of the corner of my eye, curled up behind a rock, cradling his head in his hands. *Macho bullshit*, I muttered to myself.

The shoot ended soon after that and I tripped down the hill with Lokai. Men came up to me to claim the various Turkana artifacts that they had lent me and slowly I was restored to my usual attire. The sky was gray-blue and the moon, hanging low in the west, looked like a peeled grape. I walked back to town whistling “Akidor.”

I didn’t see Chacha or Lokai the next day, but they found me the day after that at the bus station waiting on a ride south. They pulled up on a bike. Joffrey was driving.

“When will the video come out?” I asked Chacha.

“Maybe in two weeks,” he said.

We all dap-hugged and then I had to go. I thanked Chacha for the opportunity – the opportunity to be in a real musician’s music video, of course – and I walked away.

If you go on Youtube and search “*MC Chacha Akidor*” you will find the music video we made, which does include a few shots of me looking sweaty and dancing clumsily and very clearly taking directions from someone off-camera. As of November 2023, it has nearly 100,000 views and the comment section is full of effusive notes from Chacha’s fans. “Pure talent MC chacha akidor. No vulgar. No mixing of language, just Turkana language 🔥🔥👏,” one happy viewer wrote. Ateker TV, the self-proclaimed “first online Ateker television channel,” gave the video their imprimatur: “This video is 100% APPROVED ✅✅✅.” And then my favorite comment, posted two months ago, simply declares the song “The Best Turkana Love Song Ever 🎉🎉,” a sentiment that I



would, notwithstanding any bias due to my participation in the video, wholeheartedly agree with.

## The Narrow and Hard Way

The first time we met I asked Stephen Cowan what it was, exactly, that his work in the north of Kenya focused on. We were in Nyahururu, a frigid, verdant town splayed across several foothills of the Aberdare Mountains, eating oily chicken and bitter spinach, our faces cast in sharp relief by a collection of morose fluorescent bulbs placed haphazardly around the restaurant's ceiling. Stephen had taken me to a restaurant on the second floor of a drab, half-constructed building. Girders stuck out of the walls and an ominous tangle of electrical cable had congealed in one corner. We were the only patrons.

Stephen inspected a bone on his plate before answering me. "Black magic," he said. "There's a lot of it in Tuum. Terrible stuff."

"Blood covenants, that sort of thing. Killing animals and using their blood." His wife, Angelina, added helpfully.

This was not the answer I had expected. The two of them were missionaries, nominally, but they referred to their work as "holistic development on a grassroots level," though I didn't learn that until much later. At the time, as I listened to them describe how Samburu warriors would smear baboon blood over their bodies before going cattle-rustling, they seemed like characters out of the Old Testament: two stern God-fearing people blazing a righteous path in an unholy world.

I had been waiting for Stephen since one in the afternoon. We'd arranged, over Whatsapp, to meet at the Good Shepherd Lodge on October 21. We would spend the night there and leave early the next morning for Tuum, Stephen's base of operations. I found the Good Shepherd easily enough because there was a large and clumsy mural of

a shepherd conscientiously tending to his flock painted on the wall outside. A narrow passageway opened up to a central courtyard. The rooms were ringed around it, each one apparently identical in size and decor. The proprietor – Janet – was doing laundry. I told her I was supposed to meet Stephen Cowan here: Did she know him? Of course, she said, and told me to pick any room. I picked at random. There was a bed against the wall, a desk and mirror abutting it, and a tiny bathroom in which a shower and toilet glowered at each other. It was modest and clean, and my first sense of the kind of man Stephen was.

Stephen said he wouldn't be arriving until the evening, so I wandered around Nyahururu. I quickly discovered that it wasn't a town particularly conducive to wandering. I returned to the Good Shepherd.

Three hours later there was a knock on the door. I opened it. Stephen and his wife Angelina stood outside. He was tall and gangly, in well-pressed pants and a blue zippered fleece. He was nearly bald. He squinted at me through wire-rimmed glasses. I shook his large and callused hand, and then Angelina's smaller and softer one. I asked how the drive had been.

"Oh, long," he replied. "We got a flat tire near Gil-gil so that's why we're a little late."

His accent – Northern Irish – placed emphasis on the end of his sentences, so that whenever he spoke it seemed like he was telling you something intended for your edification.

"I'm just going to wash up quickly and we'll go for dinner, yeah?"

I stood in my doorway and watched Stephen vanish into his own little cell. Angelina remained outside, her arms folded over her stomach, looking both intensely patient and fatigued in a way that immediately made me feel sorry for her.

“Lord, I’m so tired,” she said, as if to confirm my sympathy. “How old are you?” She asked.

“Eighteen,” I told her.

“You’re about the same age as Jason, our middle child. He’s at university in Wales.”

“What’s he studying?”

“Marine biology,” she said plainly.

They projected an air of noble, thrifty poverty and implacable virtue. Stephen reappeared, tucking his shirt into his pants. I noticed that his back was slightly stooped, accentuating the impression, given whenever he focused on you, that he was assessing some uncomfortable and normally concealed facet of your character.

“Right. Let’s go eat,” he said, and we followed him out of the Good Shepherd.

I know Stephen and Angelina quite well now. They were my first contacts in northern Kenya and they were good ones. I’ve been to Tuum and stayed with them on three separate occasions. It was Alex Hunter who put us together. After four months of living with him, I felt that I had found my footing in Kenya. At night I had pilfered his library for books about the north, usually retro travelogues about a white man walking through the north accompanied by a cortege of camels and local guides, but their descriptions of the landscape worked like a magnet on me. I asked Alex if he knew anyone up there.

“Well,” he said, his words round and their O’s full in his accent, “I know this Northern Irish missionary. He’s amazing with cars. He lives in a place called Tuum – back of beyond, really. He’s a bit like Ian Paisley. I can write to him if you want.”

The reference went over my head, but Alex did put us together and Stephen responded immediately to my first, hesitant Whatsapp message: *Hi Max. Yes. Happy to have you. Could you meet oct. 19 at the Good shepherd lodge in nyahururu? Angelina and I will be coming back that way from Nairobi then. Best - Stephen.*

It was a plan. I packed my bag.

Looking at a map of Kenya, Tuum is located just south of Lake Turkana, which hangs from Kenya’s northern border with Ethiopia like a bony finger. It takes two full days to drive there from Nairobi – it used to take three or four, but a paved road has been inching north, each new mile of asphalt shaving a minute off the journey. The first time we drove there the asphalt fizzled out not far from Nyahururu. By June, 2022 – the last time I was in Tuum – the road extended as far as Maralal, the Samburu County seat, and cut four hours off the trip. The first time we drove there, having left the Good Shepherd early in the morning, the Land Cruiser’s axle shattered as we were crossing the El Barta plains. Stephen had to call for a replacement to be brought from Tuum, four hours away. He fiddled underneath the car while Angelina sat by the roadside, casting plangent, long-suffering sighs to the dry air and I wavered between trying to help Stephen (a futile if well-intentioned effort; I was mechanically hopeless) and giving up to join Angelina in her patient silence. It seemed an inauspicious introduction to the north. We didn’t reach Tuum until two in the morning.

When I woke up the next day, I realized with delight that for such a humble place, Tuum was situated in a natural setting as beautiful as any I had ever encountered. Behind it – to the town’s east – is Mount Nyiro. It rises, abruptly, six thousand feet above Tuum, becoming increasingly forested as it gains elevation until its upper reaches are fleeced with cedar and ringed with mist. God lives there, the Samburu say, on a particular peak called *Kos-Kos*. I glimpsed it once, like a jagged fin in a sea of clouds. Nyiro is more a plateau than a mountain; it looks like an Amazonian Tepui, mostly flat on top, crisscrossed by bracingly cold streams and shockingly green. People urge their cattle up its slopes when drought forces them to. The grass never dries up there.

Tuum lies at the base of the mountain, a hardscrabble collection of huts and some shops carved through by one road. Stephen’s compound – his mission – is bounded by a stone wall like the ones you see forlorn and mossy in the New England woods. It’s large: there’s a garage, a church, a playground, a public water source, a small schoolhouse, a tree nursery, an enclosure home to a peevish bull Stephen imported to improve the stock of Samburu cattle, Stephen’s house – a handsome A-frame built with cedar and roofed with aluminum – and four round guesthouses, built to accommodate any Christian youth groups, politicians campaigning in the area, geothermal prospectors, or people like myself. I lived in the smallest one.

Missionaries have been tramping around East Africa since Johann Ludwig Krapf, a pious, humorless German Lutheran arrived to Ethiopia in 1837. For the next fifteen years, Krapf dutifully wandered through much of Ethiopia and Kenya and set a precedent for the next one hundred and fifty years of missionary activity in the region. He was an diligent linguist who apparently mastered multiple East African languages –

including Ge'ez, the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church – and an amateur ethnographer, although the value of his observations, documented throughout his memoirs, is often dubious (“In war,” he wrote of the Oromo people, “they massacre alike the resisting and the unresisting, young and old, male and female, ripping up the latter who are with child, an Asiatic custom, which, with other Asiatic customs, would lead us to believe that their ancestors came originally from Asia”). Poor health sent Krapf back to Germany in 1853, having baptized only one person: a cripple on his deathbed named Mringe. Yet in his wake, missionary stations began peppering the East African littoral, manned by a motley, ecumenical group of men. Stephen’s own church, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, was founded by Sir William McKinnon, a canny Scottish businessman who was briefly entrusted with a vast slice of present-day Kenya and Somalia by the beleaguered British government. Preoccupied with their holdings in South Africa, Britain decided to let McKinnon and his Imperial British East Africa company have at their eastern territories. The IBEAC was dissolved in 1893, five years after its mandate was announced (“A miserable fraud and a disgrace to the English name” is how the British diplomat Gerald Portal characterized the company) but not before the seeds of a hardy Scots Presbyterianism were planted in the red soil of Kibwezi in southeastern Kenya. Sponsored by McKinnon and the IBEAC and under the leadership of Dr James Stewart – an energetic sixty-year old Scotsman and former right-hand man to Dr Livingstone himself – the minuscule band of missionaries weathered malaria, raids, and an eventual relocation to more favorable ground at Thogoto – today a satellite suburb of Nairobi where a PCEA church and hospital still stand.

Until 1958, northern Kenya was a closed district; per the colonial administration, it was intended to remain an inhospitable buffer zone between the Kenya colony and the Ethiopian and Italian Empires. Missionaries pooled along the district's borders, eagerly awaiting its opening and their opportunity to expand the Good Work northward. These early Christian missionaries wore many hats: they were doctors, educators, big-game hunters and amateur ethnographers. As Stephen would often say, "We hope that some people will see the work we do and our impact in the community and maybe they'll begin to turn towards the light." The light, naturally, was the Word of God, although Stephen was generally quick to emphasize that conversion was not the primary thrust of his mission in Tuum. What was, then? I often wondered.

Stephen was shy to discuss own spirituality. But I was sure it was there, like an underground aquifer from which he drew his strength. It took a long time before he would talk about it with me.

There was a Catholic mission in Tuum as well, but it was a tired, dusty place patrolled by quiet priests in swaying robes and decorated with droopy cacti, in contrast to the orchards and thick grass Stephen maintained on his compound and that formed a compact square of vegetation visible, I noticed much later while hovering over Tuum on Google Maps, from space.

The Catholics have a troubled history in Tuum. The entry on Tuum in Father Paulo Tablino's account of the Church in northern Kenya, *Christianity Among the Nomads*, records that the first missionary visits to Tuum began in 1965 and that shortly afterwards a primary school – education, as always, being the missionaries first mode of ingress into a community – was built. Father Joseph Polet and Father Luigi Graiff were



the parish priests at that time. “It would be too long to describe the misery and hunger I witnessed in those days,” Polet writes in his diary. The two fathers first built a road and a small dispensary, then a school and a chapel. Finally they built a house for themselves. Slowly, women and children began attending the school and even the men, who explained their initial reluctance to join the church by telling Polet “We are like hyenas – we have to go around to look for our food,” started showing up to Sunday masses. The Gospel, it seemed, was taking root in Tuum.

Then on the eleventh of January, 1981, a terrible thing happened: on his way back to Tuum, Father Luigi – along with two altar boys and a catechist – was ambushed by bandits. Father Luigi and the altar boys were shot and killed. The catechist managed to escape. He later told Father Polet that as Luigi and the boys got out of the vehicle, Luigi said “We can do nothing else but kneel and pray,” which they did, until the bandits began firing. The murderers were *Ngingoroko*, a roving band of well-armed Turkana youth looking for livestock and battle-glory, and after they had killed the priest and the children, they broke open the Catholic’s storehouse and let it be ransacked. Then the *Ngingoroko* band went on a rampage through Tuum and South Horr and killed eleven people before the Kenyan military was called in. This was probably the most momentous event to occur to the Catholics in Tuum and when I first read about it, it seemed to explain the lackluster state of their operation in the village. Their mission was haunted.

I spent my first few days in Tuum familiarizing myself with Stephen’s routine. Breakfast was at eight. Stephen, his skinny pale legs thrown over each other, sat in a sagging camp chair peering at his phone as Angelina brought out tea, coffee, fruit and muesli. By necessity, she was an ingenious and resourceful cook. Her husband had an

intense, brisk conversational style at meals. As Whatsapp messages poured in from across the county, he would announce them: “Those guys in Parakati planted some trees last month and now Joseph is telling me they’ve all died and they want to purchase more saplings from the nursery!”

“Really?” I encouraged him absentmindedly. He continued.

“If only they’d watered them regularly, and perhaps hired a *kijana* or some old mama to look after the trees – there would be no need of buying new trees! If you water a tree everyday, it will grow! People don’t seem to have that idea quite figured out yet. If they don’t see immediate results they forget about it. Ahh, *Mungu akipenda* they think. God will help you, but you’ve got to tend to things if you want them to grow!”

It did not take me long to realize that Stephen did not expect me to provide solutions to his – and Tuum’s – problems. He had lived there for too long to be surprised by the inconstancy of the people he worked with. That was just how they were. His parish's attitude towards working was one of general indifference and after thirty-five years it was something Stephen treated like weather: occasionally extreme, an easy topic of conversation, and for all his frustration, his entreaties, his bull-headed energy and his whispered prayers, out of his control.

Sunday was the Lord’s day and nobody worked in Tuum. The generator in the garage was quiet. Angelina read back issues of *Christianity Today* as the laundry dried on the line. Stephen, ever-restless, usually took it upon himself to lead a workshop in church. On my first Sunday in Tuum, I followed him as he marched down to the church with a ball of twine, a pencil, a level, and a large rock. He was going to teach a lesson on geometry.

Women, children, and a handful of meek boys awaited him. They had been there since the ten AM mass. Stephen didn't attend mass. A thickset priest, buried in a cassock and weighed down by his purple stole, led the congregation through the standing, sitting, kneeling, and singing that lasted two hours and left me, when I went, torpid and limp.

I thought that church was stupid. I'd been through eight years of Catholic education, trudging to Thursday-morning masses to sit sleepily in pews and stare at a massive, bleeding, crucified Jesus that hung dolefully from the ceiling, and the experience had left me with a gut-instinctive aversion to the affected weight and solemnity that Catholicism carried itself with. In Kenya I disliked it even more. Its wealth was offensive, along with the blind obeisance that the faith demanded – even the churches, which were erected in a hurry and in alarming numbers and then sat boxy and empty until Sunday, were generally hideous.

Stephen set up his equipment at the front of the room, stepped away, and asked his audience how they might find the center of a circle using the things he'd laid out. The translator next to him paused as he tried to summon up the Samburu word for "circle," swimming his arms through the air like an air traffic controller. The crowd twittered. Women giggled and hid their faces behind their hands in a parody of modesty. "*Twende! Ma'ave! Let's go!*" Stephen urged them in Kiswahili and Samburu, grinning broadly. At last one old woman, her neck encircled by a thick raft of beads, walked up to Stephen. She unraveled a few feet of twine and made it into a circle. Then she put the rock in the middle of the circle, stopping to look at Stephen for approval as she did so. Everyone in the pews craned their necks forward to inspect her progress. Finally, she took the tape

measure, put one end at the rock and pulled it out until it reached the twine. Pleased, she stepped back and turned – with a certain theatrical flourish, I thought – to face the crowd. They laughed and applauded. Stephen, also laughing, sent her back to her seat.

For the next forty minutes Stephen led the group through a series of largely fruitless exercises. He tried to explain the use and applications of a spirit level for a long time. It didn't seem to stick. Walking back to the house, he was chipper.

“Skull-and-crossbones? What does that mean when you see that somewhere?” He asked, still in lecture mode. “Yes, that's right. Danger. Now those people in the church don't know that. All the power lines that they've been putting up between here and Nairobi have that danger symbol on the insulators and conductors. Just last week, someone was electrocuted in South Horr” – a village across the mountain to the west of Tuum – “and it was because he didn't understand that if there's a skull-and-crossbones on something, you shouldn't touch it! I want people to have an understanding of these things, these basic things, so that when the geothermal and the mining companies come in, and when all the land on either side of the Baragoi road is bought up by Kikuyu guys, which it will be, then at least these people in Tuum can stand a chance. They'll have some tools, they'll have some skills. I don't know if that little lesson in the church helped, but I'm hoping that maybe one or two of them got the idea and it'll stay with them.”

Tuum is a one-horse town – a one-camel town really. The main, unpaved drag wobbles up a slope, flanked on either side by low concrete buildings – a couple general stores, a shop selling smoky-tasting tea, a pool hall. Everyone would drink at a wattle-and-daub complex just off the main drag. It had no name and had been built by an entrepreneurial lady who brewed huge muddy jerry cans of alcohol in her front yard

and then hauled them to the pub, where they would sit until the evening, waiting for the men to start showing up. Twenty shillings bought you a generous ladling of amber liquor, sour and warm and potent. Men sat there all day, drinking and chewing *khat* in a gazebo made of new white cedar, but it wasn't until the gong sounded at Stephen's and ended the work day that the place really started to get going. In ragged flip flops and secondhand tees picked up at *mitumba* (vast used clothing markets whose stock consists totally of donated clothes from the U.S. and Europe), men began trickling in bashfully, still shy in the last vestiges of daylight. If Stephen's name came up, a sudden guilty expression would materialize on faces, as if they expected to see him storming around the corner, yelling "*Twende kazi chini ya gari!* – Let's get to work under the car!"

It felt like a small betrayal of him for even me to be there. Stephen was a teetotaler, as far as I could tell, and he frequently condemned *khat* use; sitting in his chair at breakfast, he would read Angelina and I excerpts from studies that linked *khat* to psychosis, intent on discovering scientific support for what he considered a scourge upon the young men of Tuum. I didn't particularly like *khat* – it took hours of chewing bitter leaves to feel even a slight buzz – but I believed that its importance lay in it being a social ritual that linked men across the Horn of Africa. In countless places like Tuum – dry hamlets to the north in Ethiopia, shimmering seaside towns in Somalia, even across the Gulf of Aden, in craggy Yemeni fastnesses – I pictured groups of men in plastic chairs busy chewing, unspooling fervid conversations late into the night. But Stephen's distaste for it made sense: It had nothing to do with the Presbyterian industriousness he worked so hard to cultivate in the people he worked with – on the contrary, it made a virtue out of doing nothing, rewarded leisure, gave direction to otherwise stultifying afternoons.

Alcohol was also a vice according to Stephen. The yard around the pub was trashed with broken bottles and men got piss-drunk there, falling over each other as they danced to end up in uproarious heaps on the floor. The next day they'd stumble blearily into the garage. Some showed up drunk and Stephen would send them home for the day. "He's a good worker," he'd say ruefully, "but he can't keep away from drink!"

It got late at the pub. The little two-room building shook with dancing. A TV, the screen warped and foggy, played music videos on repeat. Sparkling white lines appeared on the scuffed pool table. "What are those?" I asked, thinking there was no way some intrepid dealer had forged a coke route to Tuum, but no one would answer me.

In the evening I'd go for long walks in the bush outside Tuum. The land felt alive. People often say that about beautiful and dramatic places, but it's true and the most apt way to describe Tuum. I'd lie down in the *luggas*, dry riverbeds where the sand was flat and marbled with whorls of red and black and press my body into the sand and feel as if I was being watched, or – better – apprehended. It didn't feel malicious or even curious. I was just being held in regard. One got the distinct impression that humans had lived on and passed over the landscape for boundless, insane amounts of time. I wondered if Stephen felt the same way, or a similar way. He has to, I thought. He had first arrived in Kenya at twenty-five, an Irish farm boy and his young wife; two humble, reverent people that had never left Ireland before, given an uncommon mission they knew would tax and isolate them. Their first months in Kenya they spent on a motorbike, driving between tiny villages, sleeping in a tent, looking for the right place to establish their episcopate. They chose Tuum because it was well-watered and the chief was welcoming. Stephen rarely evinced much sentimentality; whereas I was constantly in awe of how beautiful

the land was. It bothered me that this man – who believed in God, who gave thanks to Him at every meal, who invoked His name whenever it was appropriate to do so – so rarely acknowledged the awesomeness of the mountains and the plains, which to me, in their expanse and ruggedness and sheer gasp-inducing quality, was perfect evidence of the splendor and intricacy of God’s creation.

Stephen and I were eating muesli one morning. Angelina was in Ireland. It was just him and I in Tuum. It was August and there was mist curling off the mountain.

“Do you dream a lot? I have really wild dreams here.” I said to Stephen.

“I dream rarely, but when I do, I pay them attention.” He looked at me over his glasses.

“What do you mean?”

“I see things in my dreams.”

“Like what?”

“A few years ago, I had a dream about a toolbox that’d been missing. I saw it in the schoolhouse, under piles of old magazines. The next day, when I checked, it was there.”

“That’s impressive.”

“One time we were working on a car. I couldn’t get it to start – couldn’t figure it out. Everything seemed fine. I had a dream that I was standing over the hood of the car and I could see that there was a rag pushed deep into the intercooler tube.”

“And you found it there the next day?”

“Yes! And there it was. You remember Seren?”

I did. It was a village that lay in a valley about three hours east of Tuum. I spent a few days there in 2019, during my second stint in Tuum. Stephen sent me there along with some other young people to replace corroded water pipes. I remembered being very impressed by an old man who I watched drink water out of a shit-filled pool there to no apparent ill-effect.

“I had a dream that I struck the rock wall there and water came out.”

“Have you tried it?” I asked, a sudden image of him as a Biblical prophet summoning water from rock streaking across my mind.

“No, not yet. I should when I go there next!” He finished cheerfully, getting up from the table and jamming a threadbare cap onto his head.

Angelina usually said grace before dinner. *Dear Lord, thank you for the food you've provided here. And pray that some rain will fall soon so that the cattle will have something to eat. Pray for Caragh and Jason and Anissa that their studies go well. We pray also that there's no violence and that all the young men being circumcised next month find the strength and the grace to come to your light. And we pray that Letipo won't drink tonight and comes to work sober tomorrow. Amen.*

She didn't leave the house much. Stephen occasionally bemoaned this fact. “It's a shame really, she doesn't feel safe enough to walk in the hills like you do.” It seemed plenty safe to me; there was rarely anyone out there and besides, everyone knew who Angelina was. The Cowans were famous in Samburu County North and I couldn't imagine anyone touching them.



“It’s not the guys from here she’s worried about,” Stephen said when I brought this up. “We’ve been shot at by bandits a few times so I think that’s given her a bit of a fright.”

“Oh,” I replied, not shocked at the news that there were bandits around but as always surprised by Stephen’s attitude towards tragedy and hardship. He could have easily acted cavalier about danger, as I noticed other white men who spent time in northern Kenya did, but he was never anything but humble and self-effacing. Bullets, bandits, drought, hard work, a population largely unconvinced by the Gospel: He bore it all uncomplainingly.

I asked Angelina where her home was, or where she felt at home, was it here in Tuum where she’d lived for thirty-five years or was it back in Northern Ireland?

“Oh, in Ireland of course. No, I don't like it here very much. Too isolated.”

She said it as if she were describing a mildly uncomfortable camping holiday bereft of phone service rather than the place where she had lived for more than three decades. To me, someone for whom the question of home – where it lies, how to make it – has always been a necessary and troublesome one, her answer was startling. It implied a profound sense of duty far beyond any that I understood, a deep uxorial duty combined with, I thought, a truly Christian calling. Later I put the same question to Stephen. We were driving fast along a sandy road outside of Tuum, dust flooding through the open windows.

“Here, I suppose,” he said simply. “I can’t deal with the cold.”

Angelina’s response bothered me. It changed how I saw her. I’d thought of her as slightly less fervent than her husband but still deeply invested in Tuum and similarly

possessed of a private yet profound love for the place. Now I saw that she longed for Europe. She wanted the life her sisters and cousins had back in Belfast, predictable, rainy days that were perfectly comfortable and blithely unremarkable. I didn't blame her. She'd raised three children in Tuum and homeschooled each one. Their lesson books and art projects were stacked on shelves in the living room, chronicling the rapid progression of their motor skills and literacy. For high school, they had been sent to St Andrews – a private Christian school two hours from Nairobi – but Angelina spoke about the homeschooling period like she missed it: First to leave Tuum for boarding school had been Caragh, the eldest; then Jason, who had refused to help his father in the garage and preferred to read in his room instead; and finally Annissa, who was separated from her siblings by six years and grew up speaking Samburu. They all live in the UK now.

A lot of guys cycled through Stephen's orbit, picking up jobs in the garage or the offices, working in the orchards or with the cattle. Some were reliable, like David, who was a self-taught master builder and others, like Lodip, simply picked up jobs here and there, showing up when penury forced them to. A miniature economy had arisen around Stephen and Angelina, made possible by the Presbyterian Church of Ireland along with semi-annual grants from Irish Aid. Stephen's intention was to create a structure in Tuum that would outlast him: jobs and job training, schooling, a sense of oneself as something that transcended kin and tribe – “belonging to the world” as he once told me – attainable through hard work and an appreciation of the divine, present as it was in every fleet and silvery moment of the day.

Later, when I told Alex this, he crushed his lips into a flat line and said “The minute he leaves that place it’ll just be like he was never there.”

His prognosis, pessimistic as it was, had the ring of truth to it. Everything in Tuum was made possible through Stephen; it was all physical evidence of his energy. The buildings, the walls, the water pipes that staggered down the mountain, the nine-to-five workday he enforced through an Herculean feat of motivation. During the day, he moved around his compound like a soldier, subduing a bull broken loose, plunging his arms into the maw of a Land Rover, mixing concrete with furious turns of his wrist. His clothes were in tatters and his skin covered in grease but he had a fierce and zealous light in his eyes. At night he’d fall asleep on the rough flagstones of the living room as he waited for dinner.

White missionaries will soon be a thing of the past in northern Kenya. Stephen is due to be recalled to Belfast in three years, a prospect he eyed with equal parts trepidation and the steadfast humor that I had come to expect of him.

“I owe it to Angelina, I suppose,” he said, shrugging. “But to be honest, Max, I’ll be a fish out of water there!”

After he leaves, there will be one other PCEA family in Dukana, on Kenya’s border with Ethiopia. In ten years, they will be gone as well. “The missionaries served their purpose,” Dalle told me when I asked him what the future looked like for the north’s dwindling population of battered evangelists. “Their time is up.”

Their “purpose” – away from all the repressive, negative connotations that swirl around the word “missionary” itself, the image of nasty and sanctimonious priests burning effigies and preaching a twisted, punitive Gospel to hapless natives – was the

schooling they offered to northern Kenyans. “Without them, so many more people would still be illiterate,” Dalle said. To be sure, they were hampered by their sedentarism, unlike the Muslim preachers who migrate alongside Kenyan nomads and teach them Arabic and the Quran. But those who went through a missionary education, who learned to read and write using the careworn, colorfully illustrated kids Bible storybooks and then went on to vocational schools in Nakuru or nursing school in Nanyuki – they were the ones, Stephen assured me, who would become northern Kenya’s future leaders.

Stephen had, over the course of thirty-five years, earned the respect of everyone in Tuum. People came to him for advice, for money, informed him if their kid had done well on their exams, approached him with grievances, news, gossip. He sat on the patio with them, one leg cocked jauntily over the other. “Ahh, yes...” he’d intone, half-listening, as he responded to messages on his phone.

His principles were uncompromising. There was a right way to do things – it was the harder way, the way that required effort and conviction and long laborious hours – and there was the other way, the sloppy, compromised way. If a car had to be completely disassembled in order to repair a piece, then he would do so, uncomplainingly.

“Why do they build their houses on slopes?” He asked me once, pointing to a Samburu manyatta that was pitched at a vertiginous angle on a hillside. “The water is going to wash it away when it rains.” The question was rhetorical. The answer was culture. Stephen used the word culture often. He was fighting it. Culture meant houses built in irrational places, female genital mutilation, cattle-hoarding, the sporadic yet frequently murderous violence that flared up during the rains, superstitions and taboos

in general, Samburu astrology, and essentially any other trait, tradition, or custom that Stephen believed was restraining the growth and successful development of about 1,000 souls in and around Tuum. If Stephen was forced to build a house on a hill, he would use logs and stakes to create a level terrace and only then, after he'd done that and made sure his work was sound, would he start on the actual house.

I don't mean that Stephen thought that Samburu culture was ugly or backwards and spent his time burning false idols and railing against polygamy (although polygamy was certainly a "cultural problem" to be subtly discouraged whenever possible), but rather that he did not want people to be fettered by it. He wanted people to think for themselves, outside the attitudes that culture – in any of the thousands of mutations it takes across the world – inculcates in human beings.

In Tablino's church history of northern Kenya, he quotes from the diary of a Catholic priest, an Italian, who lived and worked twenty-five miles north of Tuum in a town called Loiyangalani:

I am now 73 and I have no more illusions. I hear the steps of the coming Lord:  
 1) The weak body, as it is shown by the visits of the doctors, the tests and the medicines, arthritis... 2). The loss of strength ...the lineaments of my face ...the loss of the energies of intelligence and will; 3) the loss of memory (I no longer remember names of people, facts, places), a feeling of senility in life: the modern things have no attraction for me, events, plays, music, readings, not even the novelties of culture, science, history, language, not the vain praises, reactions and demonstrations of esteem for me, which I considered not deserved and therefore an irony... The problem of solitude does not dishearten me, because after 35 years of episcopate in Africa I have learnt to be alone... It is in this retreat that Jesus will make the star appear in the night, that star that

leads me: prayer, meditation, the word of my spiritual director Fr Sandrone, blind in his eyes, but with a great light in his soul... I feel a call to leave everything and to follow Jesus in the desert... Palestine? Egypt? Sahara? On the shore of Lake Rudolf in an isolated place with the most poor?

It reminded me of Stephen, his ignorance of vanity and his modesty when confronted with praise. Solitude never bothered him. Tuum, so far away from the rest of Kenya, was his center. He would drive back to Tuum from Nairobi every three weeks in pants and a blue fleece against the highland's cold. As the elevation dropped and we grew closer to the flatlands, first his fleece would come off, exposing his wiry freckled arms, then he would change into shorts; next, a battered hat would appear until finally, even after the long hours of driving, as he took the final left turn towards Tuum he would look like himself again: arms bare, skinny legs working the pedals, his oil-stained hat jammed onto his head and a joyful, boyish grin spreading across his face.

## Lokiriama

“This bottle is like a cat,” Wyclife said, squeezing the plastic fifth. “If you drop it, it won’t break. It’ll be fine. But this bottle” – he hefted a glass bottle of Senator beer – “is like a snake. It’ll break easily when you drop it.”

“That’s very true,” I said, my eyes wide and unfocused. “Bro, I’m so glad we met. It was really good luck we met.”

“Yeah. Yeah! You’re really my bestie now,” Wyclife averred. We locked hands across the table.

“Oh, totally,” I said. “And dude, by the way, when we get back to Lodwar, you need to break up with Lucy. End of story. C’mon.”

“But she’s saying she wants to build a house on my plot when she finishes school this year and come *liveeee* with me,” Wyclife wailed.

“Just tell her no! Break. Break-up. You like Irima better.”

Irima and Lucy were the two women Wyclife was caught in between, the former a neighborhood girl he had known forever and the latter a girl he had met last year and who seemed to me suspiciously eager to shack up with him, considering that fact that he was only twenty and she only eighteen.

“Bro...this place, this place...” Wyclife started on a different tangent.

“It could drive you crazy.” I said seriously.

“Crazy!” He emphasized, pounding the table.

We were in a bar in Lokiriama, a hamlet on the Kenya-Uganda border. The bar’s walls were made of red clay. A strobe light sent streaks of color wiggling across the room

like tropical fish. Dusty rows of Tusker and Senator and Alexander stood at attention on shelves behind the bar.

We were drinking Alexander and had been for the past two hours. It was a Ugandan vodka and its effects had become familiar to us very quickly. I slumped back in my chair and that warm drunk unfastened feeling of well-being and love for everything around me – the bar, the reggae bubbling out of a speaker, the proprietress half-asleep, Wyclife, the little plastic bottles of Alexander rolling on the table – washed over me.

The vodka had introduced us to drunkenness and then the subsequent beers we consumed pushed us into wasted territory and by the time we left the bar, tripping on the entranceway (*Whyisthereastephere*, I bleated, clutching my bruised toe), we were spinning; I lit the wrong end of a cigarette and choked on noxious smoke. Wyclife and I put our arms around each other's shoulders and we dragged ourselves back to the police station. The police officers were relaxed; I suddenly felt like an anxious high schooler sneaking home late only to find his parents awake and awaiting him. I tried to stand very still.

The policemen didn't care about our state. Mwangi – a mustachioed officer from Nyeri, I remembered – brought a thin blue mattress out of his barrack and tossed it on the ground for us. Go to sleep, he said, chuckling. Wyclife and I collapsed simultaneously onto it. My head felt sloshy and spun queasily for a moment before my systems shut down and I fell into a deep, drunk sleep.



Thirteen hours earlier, in the white light of morning in Lodwar, I had called up Wyclife and asked him if he would be willing to take me to Lokiriama today. To my surprise, he said yes.

I didn't know much about Lokiriama. Maps.me had informed me that it was an hour's drive away. The internet had told me that it was home to an unusual monument commemorating a peace accord made between the Turkana and Karamojong in the 1970s. I was interested in northern Kenya's history of violence and thought that Lokiriama sounded like a good place to get a sense of that history. Besides, I didn't want to stay in Lodwar, where by midday it became so hot and bright that the town assumed a surreal two-dimensionality, its streets and buildings flattened by the sun.

So I called Wyclife. He agreed to my plan and eight minutes later he was outside the Amiyo Silent Guesthouse, arms crossed as he waited for me.

We gassed up the tank, filled the tires with air and changed the engine oil. We bought two pairs of sunglasses, picked up Wycliffe's black bomber jacket, and scarfed down some chai and chapatis.

"Lokiriama?" His sister said while we were grabbing the jacket. "That's faaaaaaar."

Neither of us had been there before. We'll be there in an hour, I reassured myself, thinking of the little squiggly line that maps.me had drawn between here and there and the certainty of its calculation: one hour, four minutes.

Barely a mile outside of Lodwar we got a flat. We wheeled the bike to a roadside repair place, ten guys sitting under a tree juggling their wrenches. They replaced the tire tube and sent us on our way.

The tarmac soon gave up and for the first hour and a half the road was simply a rutted sandy track. We crossed wide *luggas* full of thick sand that caused the motorbike to wobble and flounder. We disembarked and pushed the bike.

The land was flat and almost colorless, as if the sun had leached the pigmentation out of the trees and shrubs and even the sand, which was an indifferent gray.

Towns flew by – Nadapal, Turkwell, Lorugum, Namoroputh – and neither Wyclife nor I felt any desire to stop in them, not even for chai. A strange incuriosity was settling over me. I just kept staring into the wind.

We crossed another *lugga* – the fourth so far; I couldn't tell whether we were just recrossing the same one over and over again or if each one was new – and abruptly the road became stony and treacherously pitted. Worse, it was unevenly corrugated and it soon felt like we were riding an electric razor as the bike's suspension struggled to cope with the thousands of maddening little ridges in the road.

After Namoroputh we drove for an hour without seeing another human. No vehicles passed by us and the telltale glint of tin roofing was absent amidst the ashy scrub. There was a bombed-out, blighted feel to the landscape, as if a serious environmental catastrophe had just occurred here. Guilt, which had been mounting in me for a couple hours now and only grew more acute the further distant in time the one hour mark became, reached an unbearable level.

“Wyclife, I'm sorry! I didn't know it was so far out here.” I shouted into his ear.

“Yeah! It's far!” He yelled back.

He was twenty, three years younger than me, and I felt a brotherly impulse towards him. I liked how organized he'd been this morning and how willing he was to

*just send it* – drive me somewhere unknown to him and far away. I vowed to compensate him handsomely when we got back to Lodwar.

Two hours and forty-five minutes into our journey, a woman ran out into the middle of the road and stopped us. She started talking to Wyclife in Turkana, a long speech that she delivered quickly and matter-of-factly. When she was done she turned to me. She stood still, but in the twitching way someone does when they're impatient to get away as soon as they can. I asked Wyclife to translate her words into Kiswahili.

“She says she is so hungry that her heart hurts and that she was walking along the road looking for something to eat when she saw us. She has two children and she's all alone with them; last month her husband was killed by the Jie. He was grazing his livestock over the border in Uganda when they shot him and made her a widow. She's asking if we have anything we can give her.”

There was a plain-spokenness about her that seemed to indicate true, heart-wrenching grief. I dredged a hand through my pockets and offered her the few bills I came up with. She thanked us and said that Lokiriana was only another ten minutes down the road.

I decided I disliked Lokiriana within five minutes of being there. I was in a bad mood. Wyclife and I were hungry. We sat down in plastic chairs at the Ejongjong Hotel, where a jersey-clad group of children eyed us curiously.

“What food do you have.” I asked the soccer team.

“Nothing.”

“How can there be nothing.” I said, pointing behind me at two men who were digging into large and tasty-looking bowls of rice and potatoes. My low blood sugar was

beginning to manifest itself in my voice as a flat, disagreeable register. Two boys conferred amongst themselves before responding.

“They put an order in.”

“Ok. Let’s put an order in then. Can we have what they’re having.”

They agreed and said they would call us when it was ready. Until then we could find a place to park the bike and sleep at the police station on the outskirts of town.

Two hours later we were back at the Ejongjong, eating rice at a low table outside the hoteli.

A man sauntered over to us. He sat down on his *ekicholon* – the wooden stool that Turkana men carry with them – and looked at us quizzically, his eyes slowly moving back and forth between Wyclife and I.

“Where are you coming from?” He finally said.

“From Lodwar today,” I said.

“Hm.” He was silent for a moment. “That’s far.”

“I didn’t know how far it was going to be,” I said, still feeling guilty over how badly I’d underestimated the distance between here and Lodwar.

“My name is Phillip. I am the father of the chief here.”

I looked at him more carefully. He wore a black skullcap stretched tight over his head and an ivory ring on his left hand. He had very large, white, perfect teeth.

“Very nice to meet you. I’m Max.”

“What are you doing here?” He asked.

“I’m traveling,” I responded in between mouthfuls of mushy rice.

“Traveling?”

“Yes, I’m just passing through.”

“Traveling... No, you must have a reason for being here.”

“Not really. I wanted to see your town. I read about it before I came.”

He looked at me askance and began chuckling.

“What?” I said.

“You don’t just come here to travel.”

“Why not?”

“You must have a reason. You’re an NGO person?”

“No, I’m not. I just wanted to visit Lokiriama.”

“You know, it’s not good to hide what you’re doing here...”

Philip looked at me squarely. I returned his eye contact until I felt laughter welling up in me and had to refocus on my rice.

“I’m telling you the truth,” I said, holding my hands up to show how honest I was.

“I’m not an NGO person. I am just traveling here. I swear.”

“Then maybe you’re a researcher? You’re doing research?” A new voice prompted. A man sitting a few feet away had joined our conversation.

“No! Not research either.” I said, aware of a sudden defensive tone in my voice.

“Just tell the truth,” the new man said.

“Yes,” Phillip added. “Don’t hide what you’re doing here. It’s not good for new people to lie when they come here.”

Lie? I wasn’t lying. But what was I doing here?

“Guys, no, I’m serious. I’m not doing research or working for an NGO... I was curious about your town, I’d heard about it before, and I wanted to see it for myself.” I looked at Wyclife for support, but he was ignoring this conversation.

I tried to change the subject and turned to the new man. “What’s your name?”

“Ramsey.” He said. “I’m a doctor.”

“How’s work?” I ventured.

“Work is work. I am a doctor, Phillip is the chief’s father...but we still don’t know what you’re doing here. I think that maybe you’re doing some research.” He looked at me expectantly, as if we had at last reached the moment when I would reveal my true purpose in Lokiriana to him.

“I’m not a researcher,” I insisted feebly. I was stumped by the two men’s persistence. Their line of questioning seemed like the verbal expression of an internal dialogue I’d had with myself many times while in Kenya: *Why am I here? Who am I here? Who am I to the people I’m with? How do I justify my being here? How do people see me?* There were no satisfying answers to these questions and I had repeated them to myself so many times that they had largely lost their potency; they were like mantras, strings of syllables rather than words with meaning. But now, as Phillip and Ramsey stared at me, they felt renewed. I played with my rice, pushing it around in the pool of oil that had collected at the bottom of the bowl.

“If I said I am a writer and I came to Lokiriana because I am interested in stories from this region, would you be happy with that?”

“Aha,” Ramsey said. “Now that would be good. That makes sense. You see? No one just travels. In our culture – Turkana culture – if someone says they are just traveling without a purpose we say they are lost.” He looked at me pointedly.

“I don’t think I am lost, but I see what you’re saying.”

“You’re a writer...Are you going to publish a book?”

“Probably not,” I mumbled.

“Don’t say that. You shouldn’t be negative. You have to think that something will happen.”

I watched Ramsey make a vigorous upward swipe on his phone screen. He was playing Candy Crush. A glittering cascade of candies flooded the screen and exploded happily.

I woke up at two in the morning to a headache and the hydrochloric aftertaste of Alexander Vodka colluding miserably against me. Wyclife, animated by some stressful dream, had rolled over and was repeatedly hitting me in the head. I groaned and opened my eyes. The policemen were gone. A dazzling fluorescent bulb, pelted with moths, crackled nervously. In the distance, Swahili pop songs were playing off a speaker. I stood up and went to pee, sluggishly sifting through the rest of yesterday’s events.

After our dinner, Phillip had walked Wyclife and I to the police station and offered to show us the Lokiriama Peace Monument.

“Five thousand shillings,” he said.

“No way,” I said.

“But you lied to me at the hoteli about what you are doing here.”

“I didn’t lie, I just didn’t want to tell you.” I said. Having agreed with Phillip that I was a writer here on assignment, I had to admit, or at least acknowledge, that I had lied to him and Ramsey about my purpose here, which irked me because I was now lying about telling a lie.

We decided on a price and walked to the monument. It was a map. Two cement mounds had been painted green and labeled MOROTO and LOIMA, the two mountains that the Karamojong and the Turkana in this area live around. They were studded with

rocks – the mountains’ lesser peaks – around which thick lines of blue paint slalomed, representing the semi-annual rivers that had their sources on the slopes. A plaque commemorated thirty years of peace between the two groups and a headstone marked the spot where tribal leaders had buried their weapons.

“Has the peace lasted?” I asked.

“Since then, it has been peaceful,” Phillip said.

Wyclife interjected. “But we met a woman near Lokiriama today whose husband was killed by the Jie.”

Phillip grimaced and muttered something before turning away. My admiration for Wyclife grew. I had wanted to ask a similar question, as it didn’t seem like the peace accord was holding up so well. The Turkana were fighting with other groups on at least three fronts that I could think of.

We walked back to the police station in silence. The monument had not impressed me much, especially as peace was so tragically elusive in northern Kenya. A woebegone monument in a neglected hinterland under which a few dozen machine guns rotted, having since been replaced by thousands of newer and more lethal firearms.

I was still thinking about my interaction with Phillip and Ramsey at the Ejongjong. Their questioning of me, which was altogether innocuous, had prompted me to think about what I was doing here, why I had felt compelled to make the long and arduous journey to this isolated place, unsure of exactly what I was looking for but certain that once I arrived, whatever it was would be inevitable – which so far, had not been the case.

In five years of coming to Kenya, traveling around the country on buses and motorbikes and boats, sleeping in small towns and meeting people unexpectedly, I had



often wondered whether I looked silly. I was young and white, speaking a haphazard Kiswahili. I told people who asked me what I was doing here that I was just wandering, going around the country, a confession that made me feel ashamed of myself, as if my purposelessness was better kept a secret.

*Why would one travel and even worse, why write about it after?* Basically it felt good for me, the way that jogging every day does for some people. The other answer I could think of was that I liked Kenya. I liked the country, its varied landscapes, and I liked the people, who had never been anything but unfailingly kind and generous to me, so much so that it bothered me I felt I had little to offer in return other than the chance to be equally warm. I remembered an afternoon in Tuum four years earlier, when Lodip, drunk and with the seriousness that alcohol imparts to questions, asked me “What *skills* do you bring here?” Flustered, I’d said none, I was here to learn. And that was true: Over five years I had received an odd and exciting education, informed by a curricula of my own devising and led by an eclectic yet impassioned collection of teachers who were now responsible for the little bit I knew about a lot of things to do with Kenya. It was an apprenticeship. In a way, I had moulded myself in relation to an affinity for a place and writing about it felt like I was delineating the precise contours of that affinity – because, as Lodip pointed out, I didn’t yet have any real skills I could deploy in Kenya, unlike someone like Stephen, who could fix anything and was solidly practical in a way I emulated but couldn’t quite reach. Instead, I had to write honestly about the people I knew and places I had visited, and through that evince my abiding interest and deep affection for them both.

In Kenya I had tried, without really thinking about it, to follow my father’s maxim, to find a “love of place” and cultivate that “emotional and intellectual affinity”

he had sought in India. He thought that anything less than a serious, concentrated engagement with the places he traveled to was a failure and that writing was the best way to awaken oneself to a place; doing so, he often reminded me as I wrestled with the diary that he made me keep, would sharpen my curiosity and deepen my thought.

But it was paltry. For one, there would always be a distance between myself and the places I found myself in. At times that distance was troublingly, mockingly vast and at other times it seemed almost painfully slim, tantalizing me with the idea that I was only a few steps, a few more scraps of information and just a few more visits away from truly understanding a place, unlocking it and finally seeing it in its fullness and complexity. In Lokiriama, more so than anywhere else I had been, that distance seemed head-spinningly immense.

I also knew that even as I tried to write honestly, unsparingly and with affection about Kenya, what ended up on the page was undeniably colored with me. I watched Phillip as he picked at his teeth with a thorn and wondered what he might make of his inclusion in my narrative. I didn't know him; my description of him and Lokiriama, his town that I did not feel very fond of, was really a translation of my own interior state. I was reminded of something Rebecca West wrote about D.H. Lawrence, that when she met him in Florence, she found him in his hotel room furiously typing away, "vehemently and exhaustively describing the temperament of the people," despite having arrived in the city only an hour before. And although she disdained him at the time, writing that he hardly knew enough about Florence to "make his views of real value," she realized that what he was really writing about was "the state of his own soul at that moment." Florence, then, "was as good a symbol as any other."

I didn't think I was D.H. Lawrence in Kenya, hurrying back to my hotel room to jot down all I had seen and done before my impressions lost their freshness. I believed I had slightly more engagement with Kenya than Lawrence had with the city of Florence, but there was a flicker of recognition within me when I first read that story.

Was the landscape on our drive here truly as flat and colorless as I described it to be? It might have been. Or maybe I had simply been tired and hungry and fit those feelings onto the scenery, like a lampshade over a lightbulb, altering its hue and brilliance. And Phillip, who had been innocently curious about my presence in Lokiriama and asked me questions to assuage his curiosity, much as I might ask him questions to better understand him and his town, became a vector for my own doubts about what I was doing in Lokiriama and in Kenya. When I wrote up our encounter, that became the point of our conversation, its real expression.

So then what, I asked myself as I buttoned up my pants, was I hoping to find in Kenya? The question seemed stupid. I resented the idea that there was something – tidy moral lessons, a more expansive sense of self, a realization of one's own privilege – to “find” in another country, awaiting the traveler like a package in the mailbox.

Truthfully, Kenya had provided all those things to me. Not “provided,” I corrected myself. I had realized them. There are moments in my memory suffused with the glimmering sense that I was *growing up*, that my thoughts were evolving, my feelings becoming more complex and that the idea I had of myself as a person in the world was filling out, gaining weight, becoming more solid. Unlike childhood, where growing up was a colorless, obscure process, its causes uncertain, I could look at the last five years of my life and identify the days and months, the people and places, that had pushed and prodded at me, moving me, as if I was a piece on a game board, from one stage to the

next. I could trace those movements and with a pleasant sense of unity, note the corresponding changes in myself that each provoked.

When I did that, the time I spent in Kenya emerged as this great scouring force. I had been stamped with the imprint of time spent there, friendships founded there, the horizon-expanding effect of learning Kiswahili there and wherever I was, I walked around with that inside me. When I thought about the mess of experiences, choices and habits that make up a person, I felt strong and very fortunate that at least a few of mine had emerged between 2018 and 2023, five years when, if I wasn't in Kenya, I thought about it all the time and happily bankrupted myself to get back there as often as I could.

I walked slowly back to the mattress. I couldn't sleep. The music was too loud. They finally turned it off at five and I dozed for a couple of hours. I got up at seven and Wyclife and I drank some water and stood around blankly, our faces puffy, rubbing little pellets of dirt out of our skin.

The sun was beginning to strike Moroto, the large mountain on the Ugandan side of the border. I hadn't noticed it before, but from where we stood we had a good view of it. The mountain was paneled with cliffs and they glowed pink with a soft, pure luster as the morning light fell on them.

We tied my bag to the motorbike's rack and kicked the bike into gear as the policemen, yawning and scratching their bellies, emerged from their barracks.

"You're leaving?" Mwangi said.

"Back to Lodwar."

"Do you have something for us? Something to get chai or *mandazi* with?"

I patted my pockets and realized that I was broke. I had spent the last of my money on beer the night before.

“I’m sorry, I’ve got nothing,” I said. “Next time.”

Mwangi shrugged.

“Oh well. Drive safely.”

We motored out of Lokiriama, Wyclife driving fast, a little recklessly. There was no wind and the sky was blue. For a long time over my shoulder I could see the pink light from the mountain. Then my neck got sore and I faced forward again.

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## Note on the Sources

Although this project is based on conversations and interviews I had with people regarding their personal histories, I would never have been able to write it without having read dozens of books, scholarly articles, newspieces, first-hand accounts and travelogues about and around Kenya and the north. Particularly useful to me was Father Paulo Tablino's meticulously researched and well-written history of the Church in northern Kenya, *Christianity Among the Nomads*, and his equally assiduous ethnography of the Gabra, titled *The Gabra*. Monty Brown's *Where Giants Trod* was the first book I ever read on the north and contains the most detailed account of the history of European exploration in northern Kenya that I've yet found. Gunther Schlee and Abdullahi A. Shongolo's entire oeuvre – particularly *Identities on the Move, Islam and Ethnicity in Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia*, and *Pastoralism and Politics in Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia* – has been invaluable to my understanding of pastoral conflict. Hassan Kochore's articles on infrastructural development in northern Kenya were particularly useful in writing chapters one and two. The ethno-botanical study conducted by John Kimeu Mbaluka and Francis H. Brown of vegetation in the Koobi Fora region of Marsabit County and a similar study done by Daniel Stiles and Aneesa Kassam were fascinating and useful to the writing of chapter three. And Daniel Branch's very readable *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair, 1963-2011* greatly aided my understanding of Kenya's post-colonial history and the Moi years.

Throughout this project, I have used 'Kiswahili' to refer to the language. The prefix 'ki' is used in Kiswahili when speaking about a language – 'Kifaransa' is French, 'Kiarabu' is Arabic – while 'Swahili' refers to the Swahili people or Swahili culture.



## Glossary

**Aberdare Mountains:** A mountain range in central Kenya. One of Kenya's five main 'water towers' – mountains or mountain ranges that feed major rivers in the country

**Afgaba:** A waterhole and rock art site near Kalacha in northern Kenya

**afrobeats:** Broad term used to describe pop music from West Africa, particularly Nigeria and Ghana

**Akosombo Dam:** A dam built in Ghana between 1961 and 1965. Filling the dam displaced some 80,000 people – one percent of Ghana's population at the time

**Alan Ogot, Bethwell:** (1929-) Kenyan historian and writer who focuses on the history of East Africa

**alexander:** A Ugandan vodka brand, notable for its chemical taste and the hangovers drinkers wake up to the next day

**alluvium:** A deposit of sand or mud, formed by flowing water, that contains gold traces

**Amin, Idi:** (1925-2003) President of Uganda between 1971 and 1978. Amin was notorious for cruelty and the persecution of many of Uganda's ethnic groups. He was deposed in 1978 after the Tanzanian military invaded the country. He died in exile in Saudi Arabia.

**Arap Moi, Daniel:** (1924-2020) Kenya's second president from 1978 to 2002. Known for his authoritarian tactics, especially the imprisonment and torture of dissidents.

**Archer, Geoffrey:** (1882-1964) First district commissioner of the Northern Frontier District, later Governor of British Somaliland.

**Ateker, Ateker cluster:** The name for eight ethnic groups – the Turkana, Toposa, Teso, Jie, Karamojong, Nyangatom and Lango – spread across northern Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and South Sudan who share similar languages and customs.

**Baada Huri:** (Gabra) the Huri Hills

**Baragoi:** A town in the El Barta plains, two hours south of Tuum and the major center for that area

**baridi:** (Kiswahili) cold

**bhangi:** (Kiswahili) marijuana

**Biwott, Nicholas:** (1940-2017) Kenya's minister of energy during the 1980s. A sly and enigmatic politician who referred to himself as "total man" and was Daniel Arap Moi's

right hand man during his regime. The Turkwel Dam was constructed during Biwott's tenure as minister of energy

*boda-boda*: (Kiswahili) a motorbike taxi

boma: A thatch enclosure

Borana: One of two main branches of the Oromo ethnic group, with a population of about four million living between Kenya and Ethiopia

borehole: A deep hole bored in the ground for the extraction of water or oil

*buda*: (Kiswahili) a slang term meaning father or old man

chai: Sweet, milky tea served all across East Africa. It is made in a metal pot by boiling milk, tea, water, sugar and spices, bringing it to a simmer and then straining the liquid, rather than simply adding a tea bag to hot water.

Chalbi Desert: A small desert between Lake Turkana and Marsabit. 'Chalbi' means a bare, salty area in the Gabra language.

chapati: An unleavened flatbread introduced to East Africa by Indian immigrants that has become a staple carbohydrate in the region. The East African chapati is cooked with considerably more oil and is thicker than its Indian progenitor.

Cherangani Hills: A mountain range in western Kenya and one of Kenya's five main water towers. The source of the Marun River.

Cowan, Stephen: Northern Irish missionary, mechanic and humanitarian based in Tuum

Daasanach: A small ethnic group living between Kenya, Ethiopia and South Sudan

deezer: Music streaming website

Derg: The military dictatorship that ruled Ethiopia between 1974 to 1987

Derati: An oasis and police post between Ileret and North Horr in Northern Kenya

dik-dik: A small antelope found in scrublands and savannah across South and East Africa

Dinka: The largest ethnic group in South Sudan, with a population of 4.5 million

doum palm: A large palm native to North Africa and the Arabian peninsula that grows in riverine areas and oases

Dukana: A small village in Marsabit County along the Ethiopian border

*edwar*: (Turkana) A tough, yet edible fruit native to Northern Kenya, from which the town Lodwar takes its name

*ekicholon*: The Turkana name for the small wooden stools that men carry with them

El Barta Plains: A region of semi-arid grasslands in between Maralal and Mount Nyiro

Eldoret: The fifth largest city in Kenya and a major center in Western Kenya

Embu: A town in central Kenya and a major *khat*-producing center

Ethiopian Civil War: (1974-1991) A war between the military junta known as the Derg and rebels in the north of Ethiopia that left 1.4 million people dead and ended in 1991 following rebels' capture of Addis Ababa.

euphorbia: A large family of plants with about two thousand species. In Kenya, the most commonly found euphorbia is *euphorbia ingens* or the candelabra tree, a tall tree that secretes a poisonous milky latex.

*fiti*: (Kiswahili) a slang term meaning good or fine; from the English 'fit'

Forole: A mountain on Kenya's border with Ethiopia, sacred to the Gabra people that live around it

*fungua milango*: (Kiswahili) open the door

Gabra: An ethnic group living in Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia.

Ge'ez: The liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the ancestor of modern Ethiopian languages such as Amharic and Tigrinya

Gil-Gil: A lush, almost Alpine town in southern Kenya and the home of the St Andrew's School

*golbo*: (Gabra) lowlands

*hapa*: (Kiswahili) here

Homa Bay: A town on the west side of Lake Victoria

*hoteli*: (Kiswahili) a small restaurant usually serving tea, chapatis and other snacks

Huri Hills: A range of low hills in Marsabit County that offer more substantial rainfall and water sources than the surrounding desert and the traditional home base of the Gabra people

Ileret: A small town on the eastern shore of Lake Turkana near the Ethiopian border

Imperial British East Africa Company: A short-lived commercial association founded by Sir William McKinnon that had jurisdiction of a large swath of East Africa between the years 1888 and 1896.

Isiolo: Large town about five hours south of Marsabit, located on the boundary between the central Kenyan highlands and Northern Kenya

*jaba*: A slang term for *khat*

Jey-Jey Centre: A roadside guesthouse in Marsabit

Jie: An ethnic group that lives in Uganda and is a part of the Ateker cluster

*juu*: (Kiswahili) up, above, on top

Kainuk: Town along the highway to Lodwar in Turkana County

Kakamega: Highland town in western Kenya

Kakuma: One of the largest refugee camps in the world with a population of approximately 500,000 refugees from South Sudan, Somalia and other countries in the region, located in Turkana County on the road between Lodwar and Lokichogio.

Kalacha: Small oasis town four hours west of Marsabit.

Kalobeyei: The most recently built section of the Kakuma refugee camp

Kapoeta: A town in South Sudan not far from the Kenyan border

*kara*: (Daasanach) The Daasanach term for the wooden stools that men carry with them

Karamojong: An ethnic group that lives in eastern Uganda and is a part of the Ateker cluster

*kazi chini ya gari*: (Kiswahili) literally ‘work underneath the car;’ or mechanic’s work

Kenyatta, Jomo: (1897-1978) A hero of Kenyan independence and the country’s first

president *khat*: A plant native to East Africa whose leaves, when chewed, induce sociability, talkativeness and mild euphoria. *Khat* is legally cultivated across a few different regions of Kenya, particularly around Meru and Embu in Central Kenya, and *khat* consumption is widespread across the entire Horn of Africa.

Kibaki, Mwai: (1931-2022) Kenya’s third president, elected after Daniel Arap Moi’s twenty-four year reign

Kibwezi: A town in southwestern Kenya where the first Presbyterian mission to Kenya was established

*kifaru*: In Kiswahili, a rhinoceros. Also the name of a tall armored vehicle used by the Kenyan Army

*kikoi*: A sarong-like worn by men on the coast of Kenya. Kikois are made of cotton and the patterns are woven rather than dyed into the fabric. They are made with a fringed edge and frequently incorporate a colorfully patterned border.

Kikuyu: Kenya’s largest ethnic group with a population of over eight million

**Kiswahili:** A lingua franca that is spoken in Kenya, Tanzania and parts of Uganda, the Eastern Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. Kiswahili has a Bantu grammatical structure and a vocabulary that borrows heavily from Arabic; the language developed as Arab traders began visiting the East African coast from the tenth century onwards. Kiswahili is spoken – mostly as a second language – by some two hundred million people in East Africa.

**Kitale:** A large agricultural town in western Kenya, located south of the Cherangani Hills

**Kitson, Alfred: (1868-1937)** A British-Australian geologist whose reporting on the goldfields in western Kenya prompted the Kakamega Gold Rush of 1930

***kofia:*** (Kiswahili) Literally, ‘hat,’ but typically refers to a special type of round, brimless hat, flat on top, worn by men in East Africa

**Koobi Fora:** A site on the eastern shore of Lake Turkana where the Kenyan paleontologist Richard Leakey and his team have uncovered over 10,000 fossils, 350 of which belong to ancient hominid species – including one nicknamed ‘Turkana Boy,’ the most complete skeleton of an early human ever found

**Kos-Kos:** A peak of Mount Nyiro where God is said to reside, according to Samburu living around the mountain.

***kuja:*** (Kiswahili) come

***kula:*** (Kiswahili) eat

***kusi:*** The southerly wind that blows between April and November on the Kenyan coast and creates rainy conditions inland

**Kutch:** A province of Gujarat in western India along the Pakistani border and the Arabian Sea

**KVDA:** The Kerio Valley Development Authority. Formed in 1979, the KVDA manages the development of nearly all of northwestern Kenya’s resources – a mandate that includes the promotion of agriculture, mining, and conservation of water resources.

**Laisamis:** A small town along the Isiolo-Moyale highway

**Lakes State:** A state in South Sudan

**Lake Turkana:** The world’s largest desert lake, informally referred to as the ‘jade sea’ for the color of its water. Lake Turkana is saline and stretches from the Ethiopian border two hundred miles south into Northern Kenya.

***lazima:*** (Kiswahili) must, from the Arabic ‘*lazim*’

Leakey, Meave: (1942 - ) Kenyan British paleoanthropologist who discovered fossils, including those of ancient human ancestors, in northern Kenya

Lodwar: The capital of Turkana County and the largest town in northwestern Kenya. Named from *edwar*, a bitter fruit found commonly in that area.

Loima: A range of hills in western Kenya along the border with Uganda

Loiyangalani: An oasis town near the southeastern shore of Lake Turkana

Lokichogio, known commonly as Loki: Last major town before the South Sudanese border in Northern Kenya. During the 1983-2005 war in Sudan it was the former headquarters of many NGOs that operated in South Sudan

Lokiriama: Hamlet in western Kenya on the Ugandan border and home to the Lokiriama Peace Monument

Lokiriama Peace Monument: A monument commemorating a peace accord signed in 1978 between eight different ethnic groups

Lomut: Market town in West Pokot county

Lorokon: Town near to the Turkwel Dam

Lotikipi Plains: A region of grasslands in northwestern Kenya near the South Sudanese border. A large saline aquifer was discovered there in 2013.

Ludwig Krapf, Johann: (1810-1881) German missionary who traveled widely across Ethiopia. Translated the New Testament into Oromo and, following his expulsion from Ethiopia and the continuation of his missionary efforts in Kenya, compiled the first Kiswahili dictionary. The house he lived in while in Kenya is now a museum

*lugga*: A dry riverbed

Maasai Mara: A savannah region in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania, a popular destination for tourists who come to see the annual migration of wildebeest there.

mandazi: a sweet, triangular pastry, eaten widely across East Africa

manyatta: a manyatta is a settlement, often temporary, of houses encircled by a fence.

Manyattas are a common type of settlement used by pastoralists in East Africa

Maralal: The capital of Samburu County, ten hours south of Tuum. The explorer Wilfred Thesiger lived here in his old age

Marich: A small town located on the Marun River and home to a small but thriving artisanal gold panning industry

**Marsabit:** Large town in Northern Kenya. The town enjoys a temperate microclimate due to its position at 5,000 feet on Mount Marsabit.

**Marun River:** A river that flows north from the Cherangani Hills, carrying with it traces of alluvial gold that supply the gold panning business in Marich

**Matheniko:** A subset of the Karamojong that lives around Moroto close to Uganda's border with Kenya

*ma'ave:* (Samburu) let's go

**McKinnon, William:** (1823-1893) Scottish businessman who founded the Imperial British East Africa Company and who funded the first Presbyterian mission to Kenya

*mira:* (Kiswahili) *Khat*

*mitumba:* (Kiswahili) Large open-air used clothing markets whose stock is comprised of discards from America and Europe

**Moroto:** A large mountain (10,115 feet) on the Kenya-Uganda border

**Mount Marsabit:** A mountain in Northern Kenya. The town of Marsabit is located atop it.

**Mount Nyiro:** A large mountain in Samburu County that rises to approximately 9,000 feet and is considered sacred by the local Samburu

**Moyale:** Town straddling the Kenya-Ethiopia border

**Mpesa:** A mobile money-transfer service that was the first of its kind and, since its founding in 2007, now boasts more than thirty million users in Kenya. *Pesa* is Kiswahili for money.

*mswaki:* (Kiswahili) A toothbrush, typically one cut from the miswak, or mustard tree, whose twigs have antibacterial properties and are commonly used in East Africa to maintain oral hygiene

*mungu akipenda:* (Kiswahili) if God wills it

*mzee:* (Kiswahili) old man

*mzungu:* (Kiswahili) white person

**Nairobi:** Kenya's capital, located on a temperate plateau and approximately twelve hours bus ride from Marsabit

**Nakuru:** Large city about two hours west of Nairobi

**Nanam:** Hamlet near Lokichogio in northwestern Kenya

Nanyuki: Large town in Laikipia County, approximately four hours north of Nairobi and eight hours south of Marsabit by car

Nasolot Game Reserve: A conservation area in western Kenya, near the Turkwel Dam

*ngingoroko*: A term that refers to groups of young Turkana men who conduct cattle-raids. Groups usually consist of 15-30 men but can swell to about 100 when attacking a larger manyatta or settlement

*niaje*: (Kiswahili) what's up?

Northern Frontier District (NFD): Colonial-era name for northern Kenya east of Lake Turkana

North Horr: A town in between Marsabit and Ileret in Northern Kenya. 'Horr' means a shallow, ephemeral body of water in the Rendille language

Nuer: The Nuer are a group of pastoralist cattle-herders in South Sudan. They are the second largest ethnic group in that country.

Nyahururu: An agricultural town in central Kenya, formerly known as Thompson's Falls after the large waterfall near it

*nyayo*: (Kiswahili) footsteps

nyayo milk: A program that distributed free milk to schoolchildren during the Moi years

nyayo philosophy: A political philosophy espoused by Daniel Arap Moi, Kenya's second president, who believed that Kenya should follow in the footsteps of Jomo Kenyatta.

Nyeri: A central Kenyan town two hours east of Nyahururu and the county seat of Nyeri County

Oromo: The largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. Oromo is a broad term that describes a number of smaller ethnic groups related by language and customs, including the Borana and Gabra in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia.

Paisley, Ian: (1926-2014) Fire-and-brimstone Northern Irish preacher who later became the First Minister of Northern Ireland

*panya*: (Kiswahili) rat

*panya* route: A sneaky, covert route

Parakati: A small village about ten miles west of Tuum

PCEA: The Presbyterian Church of East Africa. The church boasts about four million total members across Kenya



*pilau*: A dish in which rice and meat are cooked together in one pot. In Kenya, pilau is generally eaten on special occasions along with a salad of chopped tomatoes and cabbage.

*Pokot*: An ethnic group living in western Kenya with a population of about 800,000.

*Portal, Gerald*: (1858-1894) A British diplomat who was instrumental in establishing Uganda as a crown protectorate. The town of Fort Portal in western Uganda is named after him

*probox*: A Toyota passenger vehicle, almost always white, that is commonly used as a personal vehicle and a shared taxi in Kenya. The probox, since it debuted on the market in 2002, has remained unchanged. There is only one model.

*prosopis juliflora*: A small tree native to Mexico that has been introduced to India, Kenya and other semi-arid regions of the world where it has since become an invasive weed.

*radi*: (Kiswahili) lightning

*Raila Odinga*: (1945- ) Kenyan politician who has made four unsuccessful runs for president

*Reece, Alys*: (1912-1995) Author of *To My Wife: 50 Camels*, a memoir of life and marriage in northern Kenya. Wife to Gerald Reece

*Reece, Gerald*: (1897-1985) Colonial administrator who served as district commissioner of the NFD between 1936-1939

*Riting*: The nearest village to the reservoir created by the Turkwel Dam

*Rongo*: Market town in southwestern Kenya

*rungu*: a club or knobkerrie often wielded as a symbol of authority by men in Kenya

*Ruto, William*: (1966- )The current president of Kenya. Ruto was elected in 2022 after having served as vice president under his predecessor Uhuru Kenyatta

*Samburu*: A traditionally pastoralist ethnic group living in north-central Kenya.

*Sebit*: A town in the Cherangani Hills and the site of a recently-built cement factory

*secorria*: A wild grain native to the floodplains of the Marun River in West Pokot. In July 2023, a handful of *secorria* cost twenty shillings (about ten U.S. cents).

*Senator*: A lager beer brewed in Kenya

*Seren*: A hamlet in the Matthews Range, about three hours east of Tuum

**Shashamane:** A town in southern Ethiopia where Haile Selassie granted diasporic Africans 500 acres to settle on. In the 1950s and 60s, Rastafarians from Jamaica flocked to Shashamane and settled there. The town is known for the cannabis grown by them and smuggled to Kenya.

*sheegad:* a system through which non-Somalis pledge their allegiance to a Somali clan and, over time, can become fully integrated into that clan.

**Shifita War: (1963-1967)** The Shifita War, or *Gaf Daba* in Borana (literally ‘stop-time’) was a secessionist conflict between the newly independent Republic of Kenya and Somali irredentists in northern Kenya.

**www.smubuafrica.com:** A music streaming platform catering to African listeners and hosting a wide selection of downloadable songs from the continent

**South Horr:** A small town in Samburu County, directly to the east of Tuum

**Spie Batignolles:** The French construction company contracted to build the Turkwel Dam in 1986

**St. Andrew’s School:** A private school in Gil-Gil known for the liberalism of its education and its students' upper-class backgrounds.

**Stewart, James: (1831-1905)** The explorer David Livingstone’s former right-hand man who was appointed to take charge of the first Presbyterian mission to East Africa

**Swahili:** Swahili can either refer to the Swahili people, an ethnic group of about five million along the Kenyan and Tanzanian coastlines, or their culture, a fusion of African and Arab traditions that came about through Arab traders settling on the coast starting in the eighth century, or their language, Kiswahili.

**Tablino, Paulo: (1928-2009)** An Italian missionary who lived and worked in northern Kenya for nearly fifty years and wrote a two-volume history of missionary work in the region and an ethnography of the Gabra people.

**Tanzania People’s Defense Force:** The Tanzanian military, who in 1979 invaded Uganda and deposed the dictator Idi Amin

**Thika Road:** An eight-lane (and in some places twelve-lane) highway that links Nairobi to the town of Thika, thirty miles to the north

**Thorp, J.K.R.: (1912-1963)** A British district commissioner who was stationed first in Lodwar and then in Marsabit during the 1930s. Thorp wrote a memoir of his time in

Northern Kenya called *The Glittering Lake*. He became governor of the Seychelles, where he drowned in 1961.

Toposa: An Ateker group that lives along the South Sudan-Kenya border

Turkana: The largest ethnic group in northwest Kenya. Part of the larger Ateker cluster

Turkwel Dam: A hydroelectric project built between 1986 and 1991 in West Pokot county

Turkwel River: One of the few rivers in northwestern Kenya. Dammed to create hydroelectric power by the Turkwel Dam.

Tusker: A Kenyan beer, recognizable by its elephant's head logo

Tuum: A hamlet on the west side of Mount Nyiro

*twende*: (Kiswahili) let's go

*uchawwi*: (Kiswahili) black magic

ugali: A type of corn or maize meal that is cooked in boiling water until it becomes firm. Eaten with meat and vegetables, Ugali is a staple in East Africa and has counterparts across the rest of the continent.

Upper Nyayo Road: A neighborhood in Marsabit

Vision 2030: A development plan launched in 2008 by President Mwai Kibaki with the goal of raising the standard of living in Kenya to middle income by 2030. The plan includes many large-scale infrastructural projects aimed at improving connectivity within the country and its neighbors. The proposed network of highways, oil pipelines and railways from Juba in South Sudan to Lamu on the Kenyan coast, would cross northern Kenya

Wajir: A predominantly Somali town in northeastern Kenya.

*wapi*: (Kiswahili) where

*waria*: (Kiswahili) A Somali. The word 'waria' comes from the Somali 'warya,' an exclamation used to get someone's attention

West Pokot: A county bordering Uganda and home to the Turkwel Dam, the Cherangani Hills, and the gold-panning town of Marich.

White Highlands: The colonial-era nickname for a large section of highlands in central Kenya that were reserved for exclusive use and settlement by Europeans

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