

Fossils

(or the movement of an image across a field of memory)

by Jonathan Gathaara Sölanke Fraser

an illustration of time.

My late aunt and uncle's house is a bungalow with a wide base. A low and wide house in whose living room I listened to Coldplay's *Speed of Sound* for the first time as a young boy. It is a very vivid memory that has made itself at home in a portion of my personal history.

The rising first two seconds of the song are like the sound of a gong played in reverse, a gradual focusing of sound that becomes a repeated melody carried throughout the song. Then follows a ray of light splayed across the ceiling from the windscreen of a car outside. The light is adamant about maintaining a non-shape but I can see the edges of a spider's messy web in there and as it moves from one end to another, it becomes the migratory routes of some animal, a mass of scar tissue, a tangle of cells beneath a microscope's lens, water. And then it is gone.

Memory is subjective and so exists outside of time. The *concept* of time within the confines of memory is much more pliable and so the two seconds of condensing sound is stretched to absurd limits and the momentary glance of light on the ceiling lasts a lifetime.

a far away house in the bundus¹

I am on my way through dirt and distance to visit the artist Jackie Karuti. She has been living at Neo Musangi's² home on the periphery of the Nairobi National Park for what will become two months as a sort of artist residency. Jackie makes work around the idea of the alternative, the imagined-made-real and the inhabitants of many worlds.

The cab's headlights cut a wide beam through the dark and the road is dusty so it looks as though we are driving on a cloud. The headlights occasionally cast their light against something more solid. A huge rock, an acacia tree, a man walking alone are all manifested by the moving lights draping over their solidness like so much cloth.

Nairobi as a city exists much further out, beyond the reach of our lights. It is a sort of soup when you're in it. Vehicles caught in a clot of traffic, reflective glass catching and throwing light, ubiquitous coffee houses, purple Jacaranda, city council housing, Arizona, Santa Fe and Memphis Fish and Chips, and music that is only loud are all a part of this soup. You move further out, the soup begins to thicken and all the *JoyTech Electricals*, *Jaysun Autos*, *God's Gift Auto Spares* and *Savannah Butchery's* begin to congeal into one another; their colours mixing until brown. Even further out where all memory of stray cats, dogs, and people begins to fade, the city is flattened and stretched out into a hard line of concentrated points of light. This is the weight of distance pressing the world down into an even map.

And perhaps distance substitutes time; twenty-five kilometers as fifty-four minutes. So, in this context, twenty-five kilometers later, it is night and I have made it to the house. There are few clouds in the solid sky and the moon casts a palid glow over everything. The air is crisp and there is a warm light pouring from the house like a vessel tipped over its side. The front door that was closed is now opened to me and a little heat escapes past me on my way in. My eyes adjust and I can see now that there are three chairs, two desks, a couch, photographs in frames, two packs of cigarettes, a portable printing press, two paintings, many, many books and a multitude of things that populate my peripheral vision.

The room I have is not nearly as full as the rest of the house but on top of the dresser is a tiny pink Chanel bottle in its case, a pack of mint chewing gum, white shoelaces, five white pills in a

plastic casing and other small things. There is a low bed in the middle of the room, a corner with hanging jackets and shirts across from which a duffel bag sits open with clothes peeking out. I touch, smell and look at all these things; catalogue them according to colour, size, smell, texture, material deciding that they are now just as much a part of the house as they are a part of their owner.

When the house has passed into slumber a few hours later, I remain awake and look at the books in bookshelves. At the smooth red floor. At the round face of a woman smiling at me through a frame. At the surface of a work-desk. I look on and find myself taking unconscious measure of the distance between the laptop and the lighter, the lighter and the notebook, the notebook and the desk itself. By absorbing the house and allowing it to soak beneath the skin, I feel like something of a voyeur or an explorer maybe.

Looking implies distance and now that distance can be substituted for time, the act of looking can be prophetic. To see potentialities - like a host of chairs thrust skyward by the wind, a foreboding cloud, an insect's wing or a staircase - is perhaps what Jackie does.

another illustration of time

And at some other time, after the making of the world but before a record of time was kept, there was a creature living here. This country that now alternates abruptly between flatness and depressions, dust and greenery, parched and drenched was then a different place. That is the nature of the earth; to be folded, creased and ironed flat by the action of time.

We can imagine that here where the house will stand, is woodland and rock and that the land is green from underground water. If you listen carefully, there are individual sounds to be gently teased out and parsed from the fabric of the air. Insects trilling and chirping and stopping when a predator is near. Birds making the noises only other birds care to understand. And small mammals among the rocks, moving quickly, stopping to listen and moving quickly again.

The tree cover is dense and conceals the length and breadth of the land so that 'as far as the eye can see' is not very far at all.

And that creature living here is moving with slow determination beneath the trees. It is an odd thing to look at now with its light brown colouration, long, long legs and very squat body. Oddness aside, it moves gracefully with the declines or inclines of the land. It does not hesitate, trip, or falter, and lingers a while when the trees' foliage isn't so dense and the sunlight makes it to the ground.

Nonetheless it dies and with time this country changes. The land dries out somewhat. The trees become more sparse and congregate along the banks of a new river that cuts the skin of this place on its blind way. Like a cloth, the landscape is made to rise and fall and contract and expand, revealing and concealing layers of time; rock; dirt. Some things are pressed down, their soft parts made into dirt and their bones into stone and hidden for a while until such a time as the earth reveals it once more.

play

Let us consider for a moment that the floor is lava.

Your shoes or feet, if they are touching the ground, begin to feel an intense heat and you know for a fact that it is only a matter of time before they burst into flame and you are consumed. By some act of providence, nothing else is harmed by the lava (the bed is fine and the chairs don't seem to notice) and so you must navigate your life from atop other things lest you lose more than just your life; the game.

I went to play with Jackie in Neo's House. This play is also the granting of access not just to specific coordinates on a map, but to a history, geography, people, context and knowledge specific to a place.

Playing is empathy and the floor is lava.

We take a walk across the flat country where dust is red, the trees are sharp and the heat melts the horizon line. She carries a short wave FM radio with us that emits a low static crackle whenever either of us gets a call or text. The radio shifts between stations as we walk, snagging a bit of Maa³ there, some Bongo⁴ lyrics here and perhaps a phone call or two.

The radio is magic and the floor is lava.

Jackie and I go outside. As we walk, Jackie tells me of the stories endemic to this place. Far away animals seen through lenses and a leopard that visits often. About those living here and those who once lived there. Who possibly begat whom. Longsuffering servants who know things they should not. Violences and old hurts.

The land is old and the floor is lava.

At night, the main gates are open for wild animals to move freely. The dogs are locked in. We lock ourselves in. The doors to the house are locked and bolted in the night and unbolted, unlocked in the morning. Every night and every morning.

Routine is ritual and the floor is lava.

to take into account and draw connections

cactus	rock	radio
fossil	125 centimeters	stairs
bed	autopsy	river
tracks	fly	

The act of writing is only made whole through the act of reading. You are complicit in the recording of a thought and this shared knowledge lives a little longer because of this. I do not think it is too much of a stretch to present the acts of writing and reading as a call and repeat, albeit further removed from its participants.

A connection is made over the distances of time and space that moves in either direction.

Connections are made between the readers and writers but also within elements of the text as well. So a remote house in Ongata Rongai is connected by fine thread to the African Heritage House⁵ in Mlolongo. A magical radio that snags dissonant voices from the ether is tethered to another radio carried by an African docent giving a guided tour; the weak voice of an American octogenarian has replaced his own and plays through the radio.

At the African Heritage House, there is a photograph taken from the entrance of the house facing out into the Nairobi National Park. It shows a great herd of wildebeest moving across the landscape no more than a few hundred metres away. The green of the grass has faded towards yellow and the paper itself looks thinned from age. In the wildebeests' place there is now a train track and electric fencing and as Alan Donovan⁶ talks about it you can almost smell the collective musk of a few hundred herbivores. There is a love for the land here but only for the land from a certain 'when'.

moving images/ the mind with the movie camera

The image differs from a picture in that it represents something beyond what it appears to be. The caveat being that representation and meaning only exist when a viewer has access to a key (like a map) so it means nothing for a person to wear lipstick and a leopard print dress unless there is context added.

The house, when playing, has the surface of the world superimposed upon it and so there is a river, where once there were stairs, coming down from the mountain. The flight of stairs remains a flight of stairs but it is also a river now. Rushing down, turning, cutting through stone.

Like a projected image on a surface, all things take on a double meaning. Floor plans become maps, elevations become topography and a mountain grows out of a landing.

Hold this image in your mind. A figure seated on some high mountain looking out into the horizon and perhaps beyond it. Seeing the outward radiation from house, to rock, to forest, to uneven horizon. And as they look on their skin changes, rippling from spotted fur to brown skin. Fang and claw become tooth and nail. Now a woman sits there, now a child, now a vessel, now an old man, now a bird. To be many things all at once; this fluidity is what god looks like perhaps. A constant becoming of a different image with a different meaning each passing moment.

Let's pause for a moment to consider the simple diagram of a camera where light reflected from an object makes its way into the camera through a lens or a hole and is projected onto the back of the camera. The camera records images but also projects meaning onto its subjects. Just the choice to record something as opposed to another colours it a certain way let alone the way it is recorded. The camera becomes a tool of our ability to transfigure, extending our faculties beyond their limits so that our gaze is widened.

In another room, is a bed with a naked woman lying prostrate upon it and as you look on, you recall the many ways women have been depicted in art and advertising. You recall the many adjectives that go with this configuration one being 'fecund' and by association 'fallow'. There is a bed with a naked woman lying prostrate upon it.

In the vein of Kentridge's⁷ working philosophy, Jackie's images sometimes move from one medium to another, taking on different meanings as they go. A four legged wooden platform Jackie used in an older body of work signified the watchtower, operating as a tool of surveillance and othering. And it reappeared many times over in drawings, and videos becoming a shorthand recognizable to those familiar with her work. It is now a fossil or, depending on the reading of it, has always been one. And this complicates the matter of her work because the tower is not the only image to move across borders. The hand, the walking man, the crow, the screen/monitor may acquire new skins compelling us to revisit and dissect earlier narratives.

Let's pause again and consider the still. In filmmaking, a still is a single photographic frame that when viewed in tandem with others at a certain speed gives you a moving image. It's the concept of a single line being composed of many dots. Films are made this way, leading from one image to another until meaning is made and so meaning in filmmaking doesn't only come from the images themselves but from their arrangement as well; in their editing.

Something of this place has been left in Jackie and so something of this place and Jackie has been left in me. It is a difficult thing to express but it comes into sharp focus in the morning sun's intensity. The near-fractal shape of a cactus, repeating its own form upon itself. The folded ear of a dog. In quiet spaces between sounds.

1. *Bundus* - A word referring to a wild uninhabited region far from urban settlement; same use as wilderness. Originating from southern African Bantu languages.
2. *Neo Musangi* - Neo Sinoxolo Musangi is a nonbinary academic, activist, poet and performer living in Nairobi Kenya. ([Feminist Loft | Neo Musangi](#))
3. *Maa* - Maa language is a member of the East Nilotic branch of the Nilo-Saharan language family spoken by about 900,000 people in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. The term Maasai refers to "one who speaks the Maa language". ([Maa Language Project](#))
4. *Bongo* - Bongo Flava is a Tanzanian genre of music. The genre developed in the 1990s, mainly as a derivative of American hip hop, with additional influences from Reggae, R&B, Afrobeat, Dancehall, and traditional Tanzanian styles such as Taarab and Dansi, a combination that forms a unique style of music. ([Bongo Flava | Wikipedia](#))
5. *African Heritage House* - African Heritage was the first pan African gallery on the continent established in 1972 by Joseph and Sheila Murumbi and Alan Donovan. Alan would later go on to open the African Heritage House, a museum which now holds a significant portion of Joseph Murumbi's collection.
6. *Alan Donovan* - Alan Donovan arrived in Africa as a relief officer with the US State Department before retiring his post and travelling the continent. He later met and befriended the then Vice President of Kenya, Joseph Murumbi, who was a collector of African material culture. ([africanheritagebook.com](#))
7. *(William) Kentridge* - William Kentridge (b. 1955) is a South African multimedia artist primarily known for his charcoal drawings which he transmutes into films. ([William Kentridge](#) | [Art21](#))