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## Preface

Sometime in 1960 I met Mr Jonathan Kariara outside the Main Hall of Makerere University College and on an impulse stopped him: I had written a short story and would he care to look at it? Mr Kariara was then in his final year as a student of English: he was very involved in *Penpoint*, a journal then at the centre of the creative efforts on Makerere Hill. I had told him a lie. I was then in my second preliminary year, and the story was only in my mind. But with my impulsive lie, I knew I had to write a story. This later became *The Fig Tree* (*Mugumo* in this collection) and Mr Kariara was very excited about it: had I been reading D. H. Lawrence, he asked, and I was impressed and very encouraged. That was the beginning of a fairly creative three-year period during which I wrote *The Return*, *Gone with the Drought*, *The Village Priest*, *The Martyr*, *A Meeting in the Dark*, *And the Rain Came Down!* and the first sketches of *The Black Bird* and *The Mubenzi Tribesman*, alongside two novels and a play. In 1964 the well for short stories dried up. I attempted to write about my encounter with England and failed. Yorkshire Moors, Brontës' Countryside, the Scottish Highlands, especially Inverness of yellow gorse and silver birches: all these were beautiful yes, but they only made me vividly live the Limuru landscape with its sudden drop into the Rift Valley. Memories of beauty and terror. I wrote *A Grain of Wheat*.

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In 1971 I returned to Kenya from a one-year spell teaching African Literature at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. I looked at the tired and bewildered faces of the people: I went to places where people went to drown their memories of yesterday and their hopes and fears for tomorrow in drinking. I visited various bars in Limuru, drinking, singing and dancing and trying not to see or to remember. A friend told of an interesting episode. A barmaid had been arrested for stealing money from an aged trader, her one-night lover. The friend who told the story was condemning the rather petty and amateurish theft. But I was intrigued by the fact that the girl had returned to the same bar and for a whole day lived in an ostentatious display of wealth and well-being. That was the beginning of the three stories (*Minutes of Glory*, *Wedding at the Cross* and *A Mercedes Funeral*) which were meant to be the first in a series of secret lives. I also started working on a novel: how could I not see and hear and remember?

So that in a sense the stories in this collection form my creative autobiography over the last twelve years and touch on ideas and moods affecting me over the same period. My writing is really an attempt to understand myself and my situation in society and in history. As I write I remember the nights of fighting in my father's house; my mother's struggle with the soil so that we might eat, have decent clothes and get some schooling; my elder brother, Wallace Mwangi, running to the cover and security of the forest under a hail of bullets from Colonial policemen; his messages from the forest urging me to continue with education at any cost; my cousin, Gichini wa Ngũgĩ, just escaping the hangman's rope because he had been caught with live bullets; uncles and other villagers murdered because they had taken the oath; the beautiful courage of ordinary men and women in Kenya who stood up to the might of British imperialism and indiscriminate terrorism. I remember

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too some relatives and fellow villagers who carried the gun for the white man and often became his messengers of blood. I remember the fears, the betrayals, Rachael's tears, the moments of despair and love and kinship in struggle and I try to find the meaning of it all through my pen.

On this road I have been helped and encouraged by many: Kariara, Joe Mutiga, G. G. Kuruma, Karienyeh Yohana, Ime Ikiddeh, Peter Nazareth, Hugh Dinwiddy, Chinua Achebe, and several others from Limuru. Encouraging, and touching too, have been the many letters from numerous boys and girls all over Kenya and whom I have never met. Currently I am deriving much pleasure and faith and hope from the exciting work being done at the University of Nairobi on African Literature, both oral and written. Taban lo Liyong, Okot p'Bitek, Eddah Gachukia, Chris Wanjala, Bhadur Tejani and other staff: hardly a month passes without our celebrating a literary event. And of course there is *Busara*, and the students' Writers Workshop, and the drama society, and new exciting names on the Kenyan literary scene: Kibera, Kahiga, Charles Mangua, Mwangi Ruheni, Jared Angira, to mention a few.

And above all there's Nyambura, beautiful Nyambura: from her I have derived the strength to rise from constant moods of despair and self-doubt to celebrate a few minutes of glory. Hence the present offering of secret lives.

NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O

1975

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## Acknowledgements

Many of these stories have been published in various magazines including *Penpoint*, *Kenya Weekly News*, *Transition*, *The New African*, *Zuka*, *Ghala*, *Joe*, and some Russian and German journals. Some have appeared in anthologies too numerous to mention. *And the Rain Came Down!*, *Minutes of Glory*, *Wedding at the Cross*, *A Mercedes Funeral* and *The Black Bird* are appearing in book form for the first time. *The Mubenzi Tribesman* and *Goodbye Africa* are being published for the first time.

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