

Okot p'Bitek · *Uganda*

*from* SONG OF LAWINO

Listen, my clansmen,  
I cry over my husband  
Whose head is lost.  
Ocol has lost his head  
In the forest of books.

When my husband  
Was still wooing me  
His eyes were still alive,  
His ears were still unblocked,  
Ocol had not yet become a fool  
My friend was a man then!

He had not yet become a woman,  
He was still a free man,  
His heart was still his chief.

My husband was still a Black man  
The son of the Bull  
The son of Agik  
The woman from Okol  
Was still a man,  
An Acoli. . . .

The papers on my husband's desk  
Coil threateningly  
Like the giant forest climbers,  
Like the kituba tree  
That squeezes other trees to death;  
Some stand up,  
Others lie on their backs,  
They are interlocked  
Like the legs of youths  
At the orak dance,

Like the legs of the planks  
Of the goggo fence,  
They are tightly interlocked  
Like the legs of the giant forest climbers  
In the impenetrable forest.

My husband's house  
Is a mighty forest of books,  
Dark it is and very damp,  
The steam rising from the ground  
Hot thick and poisonous  
Mingles with the corrosive dew  
And the rain drops  
That have collected in the leaves. . . .  
O, my clansmen,

Let us all cry together!  
Come,  
Let us mourn the death of my husband,  
The death of a Prince  
The Ash that was produced  
By a great Fire!  
O, this homestead is utterly dead,  
Close the gates  
With lacari thorns,  
For the Prince  
The heir to the Stool is lost!  
And all the young men  
Have perished in the wilderness!  
And the fame of this homestead  
That once blazed like a wild fire  
In a moonless night  
Is now like the last breaths  
Of a dying old man!

There is not one single true son left,  
The entire village  
Has fallen into the hands  
Of war captives and slaves!  
Perhaps one of our boys

Escaped with his life!  
Perhaps he is hiding in the bush  
Waiting for the sun to set!

But will he come?  
Before the next mourning?  
Will he arrive in time?

Bile burns my inside!  
I feel like vomiting!  
For all our young men  
Were finished in the forest,  
Their manhood was finished  
In the classrooms,  
Their testicles  
Were smashed  
With large books!