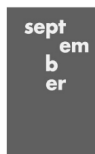


**the
dragonfly
sea**

**yvonne
adhiambo owuor**



An extract from
September Publishing

Published in the UK in 2021 by September Publishing

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First published in the United States in 2019 by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, and distributed in Canada by Random House of Canada, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited, Toronto.

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Hardback ISBN 978-1-912836-47-5

Epub ISBN 978-1-912836-49-9

Printed in Poland on paper from responsibly managed, sustainable sources by Hussar Books

September Publishing
www.septemberpublishing.org

Robo ni mgeni.

The soul is a visitor (stranger).

To cross the vast ocean to their south, water-chasing dragonflies with forebears in Northern India had hitched a ride on a sedate “in-between seasons” morning wind, one of the monsoon’s introits, the *matlai*. One day in 1992, four generations later, under dark-purplish-blue clouds, these fleeting beings settled on the mangrove-fringed southwest coast of a little girl’s island. The *matlai* conspired with a shimmering full moon to charge the island, its fishermen, prophets, traders, seamen, seawomen, healers, shipbuilders, dreamers, tailors, madmen, teachers, mothers, and fathers with a fretfulness that mirrored the slow-churning turquoise sea.

Dusk stalked the Lamu Archipelago’s largest and sullenest island, trudging from Siyu on the north coast, upending Kizingitini’s fishing fleets before swooping southwest to brood over a Pate Town that was already moldering in the malaise of unrequited yearnings. Bruised by endless deeds of guile, siege, war, and seduction, like the island that contained it, Pate Town marked melancholic time. A leaden sky poured dull-red light over a crowd of petulant ghosts, dormant feuds, forfeited glories, invisible roads, and congealing millennia-old conspiracies. Weaker light leached into ancient crevices, tombs, and ruins, and signaled to a people who were willing to cohabit with tragedy, trusting that time transformed even cataclysms into echoes.

Deep inside Pate, a cock crowed, and from the depths of space a summons, the Adhan, crescendoed. Sea winds tugged at a little girl’s

lemon-green headscarf, revealing dense, black curly hair that blew into her eyes. From within her mangrove hideout, the scrawny seven-year-old, wearing an oversized floral dress that she was supposed to grow into, watched dense storm clouds hobble inland. She decided that these were a monster's footsteps, a monster whose strides left streaks of pink light on the sky. Seawater lapped at her knees, and her bare feet sank into the black sand as she clutched another scrawny being, a purring dirty-white kitten. She was betting that the storm—her monster—would reach land before a passenger-laden *dau* now muddling its way toward the cracked wharf to the right of her. She held her breath. “Home-comers,” she called all passengers. *Wajio*. The child could rely on such home-comers to be jolted like marionettes whenever there was a hint of rain. She giggled in anticipation as the midsized *dau*, with *Bi Kidude* painted in flaking yellow, eased into the creek.

Scattered, soft raindrops.

The thunder's spirited rumbling caused every home-comer to raise his or her eyes skyward and squawk like a hornbill. The watching girl sniggered as she stroked her kitten, pinching its fur in her thrill. It mewled. “Shhh,” she whispered back as she peered through mangrove leaves, the better to study the passengers' drizzle-blurred faces—a child looking for and gathering words, images, sounds, moods, colors, conversations, and shapes, which she could store in one of the shelves of her soul, to retrieve later and reflect upon.

Every day, in secret, she went to and stood by the portals of this sea, her sea. She was waiting for Someone.

The girl now moved the kitten from her right to her left shoulder. Its extra-large blue eyes followed the dance of eight golden dragonflies hovering close by. Thunder. The *dau* drew parallel to the girl, and she fixated on a man in a cream-colored suit who was slumped over the vessel's edge. She was about to cackle at his discomfort when a high and harried voice intruded:

“Ayaaaaana!”

Her surveillance of the man was interrupted as lightning split the sky.

“Ayaaaaana!”

It was her mother.

“Ayaaaaana!”

At first, the little girl froze. Then she crouched low, almost kneeling in the water, and stroked her kitten. She whispered to it, “*Haidburu*”—Don’t mind. “She can’t see us.”

Ayaana was supposed to be recovering from a morning asthma attack. Bi Munira, her mother, had rubbed clove oil over her tightened chest and stuffed the all-ailment-treating black kalonji seeds into her mouth. They had sat together, naked under a blanket, while a pot of steaming herbs, which included eucalyptus and mint, decongested their lungs. Ayaana had gulped down air and blocked her breath to swallow six full tablespoons of cod-liver oil. She had gurgled a bitter concoction and been lulled to sleep by her mother’s dulcet “*do-do-do*.” She had woken up to the sounds of her mother at work: the tinkle of glass, brass, and ceramic; the aroma of rose, clove, *langilangi*, and moonflower; and the lilts of women’s voices inside her mother’s rudimentary home-based beauty salon.

Ayaana had tried. She had half napped until a high-pitched sea wind pierced and scattered her reverie. She had heard far-off thunder, but she had pinned herself to the bed until the persistent beckoning of the storm proved irresistible. Then she rolled out of bed, arranged extra pillows to simulate a body, and covered these with sheets. She squeezed out of a high window and shimmied down drainpipes clamped to the crumbling coral wall. On the ground, she found the kitten she had rescued from a muddy drain several days ago, stretched out on their doorstep. She picked it up and planted it on her right shoulder, dashed off to the seafront, and finally swung north to the mangrove section of the creek, from where she could spy on the world unseen.

“Ayaaaana!”

The wind cooled her face. The kitten purred. Ayaana watched the *dau*. The cream-suited elderly stranger lifted his head. Their eyes connected. Ayaana ducked, pressing into the mangrove shadows, her heart racing. How had that happened?

“Ayaaaana!” Her mother’s voice was closer. “Where’s that child? Ayaaaana? Must I talk to God?”

Ayaana looked toward the boat and again at the blackening skies. She would never know what landed first, the boat or the storm. She remembered the eyes that had struck hers. Would their owner tell on her? She scanned the passageway, looking for those eyes again. The kitten on her shoulder pressed its face into her neck.

“Ayaana! *Haki ya Mungu . . . aiee!*” The threat-drenched contralto came from the bushes to the left of the mangroves. “*Aii, mwanaangu, mbona wanitesa?*” Too close. The girl abandoned her cover, splashed through the low tide to reach open sands. Ayaana scrambled from stone to stone, with the kitten clinging to her neck. She dropped out of sight.

The stranger, a man from Nanjing, saw a small creature soar against the backdrop of a black sky, hover, and then fall like a broken-off bough; as she did so, a long chortle erupted out of him. His fellow travelers, already sympathetic about his chronic seasickness, glanced at him with unease. It was not uncommon for seasickness to turn previously sane persons into lunatics. The man focused on the land, eyes active in his placid face. A cataract in his right eye gave it a luminosity in his balding head on his tendon-lined neck. He turned at the sound of a woman’s voice calling, “*Ayaana!*” Stomach roil. Craving the sense of land, he tried to measure the distance between the boat and the jetty, hoping that they would dock soon.

Fifteen minutes later, ill-fitting suit aflutter, the visitor stepped off the boat. He had to wade through shallow water to reach the black sand shore. Even though anonymous hands helped him forward, he stumbled. His hands touched the soil. He swallowed air. Here were the rustlings of ghosts. Here was the lonely humming of those who had died far from home and had for too long been neither sought nor remembered. A brown hand dangled in front of his face. He took it. One of the sailors helped him up before handing over his single gray bag. The man intoned, “*Itifaki imezingatiwa,*” and then chortled at a secret joke.

The traveler blinked, uneasy and engulfed by redolent evening scents; *oudhi* spattered enchantment. His breath discerned bitter orange, sweet balsam, and the sweat of the sea blended in a dense air that also heated his bones. Succumbing, inhaling. He then tilted his head toward the hubbub of human arrivals. He heard the music of a rolling tide. He glimpsed an almost storm hovering on the horizon. *What was this place?* He ambled forward, heels rotating as if his toes had roving eyes. Pale light shone on a pink petal falling from a soli-

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tary and slender wild-rose bush. The man faltered. He waited for the petal to settle on the ground before reaching for it. Only then did he lift it to his lips, enclosing it in one hand while the other adjusted the condensed contents of a life that fit into the canvas bag hanging from his shoulder.

*Mwenda Pate harudi,
Kijacho ni kilio.*

One who goes to Pate does not return;
only a wail resounds.

The morning when the man from China entered Kenya—inside a spacious lime-washed bedroom within a wood-and-coral two-story house located in a twelve-house maze in Pate Town still chiseled by trade winds named *kusi*, *matlai*, *malelezi*, and *kaskazi*—an aging seaman, Muhidin Baadawi Mlingoti, dreamed, again, that he was circumnavigating a gigantic sapphire mountain at the bottom of the sea. He carried a map in the dream. It was inside a dark brown book, and contained arcane words that lit up as if inflamed. The real version of his dream map was under his bed, inside an ornate mahogany Lamu chest, bundled up in a dark green cloth.

Five years back, Muhidin, the sun-blackened, salt-water-seared, bug-eyed, and brawny descendant of Pate Island fishermen and boatbuilders, had swiped this book from one of thousands in the private library of a Dubai-based war and sea bounty collector to whom Muhidin would sometimes sell contraband artifacts. Inside the book's pages he had found a beguiling yellow-brown parchment with maplike markings in a cryptic language that featured the emblem of an archaic compass that indicated the east as the starting point for movement. When Muhidin first examined the parchment, he had imagined it was written out in musical notation. Later, he saw that, when exposed to dusk's light, the parchment emitted an intimate attar that evoked sandalwood. What was it? A memory map's paean to trade winds, ports, and travelers? What if the fragment was a flavored piece from a foolish tale, one of those interminable *Alfa Lela Ulela—Thousand and One Nights*—gossip sheets? *It is nothing*, Muhidin told himself to assuage

his lust to know. *It is nothing*. Still, whenever Muhidin fell foul of the haunted realms of his heart, he would automatically reach under the bed to retrieve the book and touch the parchment for reassurance.

Long, long ago, when Muhidin was no more than a boy, a fierce song had burned into his being. It had clung to him like an earth-stranded ghost. It would later re-emerge as dreams that woke him up with a craving for unnamable things. The song would turn an illiterate island boy into a seeker, traveler, reader, and sleuth—a hungry truth-hunter. Muhidin Khamis Mlingoti wa Baadawi had been orphaned when a Likoni South Coast ferry sank with his parents and five siblings. Through this tragedy, his childless relatives—Uncle Hamid, a *zumari* player and master boatman, and his wife, Zainab—acquired a punching bag and an indentured servant. However, during a four-day fishing trip with his uncle, in the middle of a thrashing, rolling, wrestling match with an enraged giant black marlin, goaded by his uncle’s baleful threats—“Dare you lose my fish, dare you”—the terror-stricken fourteen-year-old had slipped into a state of high concentration, inside of which whisperings, as if from the Source of Life, bubbled forth. In these he heard a palpable sea-song, which sucked him into the soul of a single wet note made out of the contents of time. The song penetrated his young heart, which proceeded to shatter and scatter as portions of infinite sun across chilled worlds. From that moment, Muhidin would be struck with perpetual homesickness for an unknown place.

Suddenly docile, the fish had yielded its life.

Afterward, a desultory silence. Then Muhidin had tumbled about the boat, keening, the bitter sound drenching his wrinkled uncle Hamid, who contemplated Muhidin with very old, very dark, very cheerless eyes. “It’s nothing,” the uncle grunted five nights later. “The disarray of wind.” But the uncle and his wife never touched Muhidin again.

The emotion of the event had later pressed Muhidin into the sea’s service, where he would work nonstop, an enchanted captive. Whenever he reached land, he darted after illusions as if they were fireflies. He dredged dark nooks in port cities, buying, bartering, stealing, and scrounging for maps and riddles. He scoured arcane notations, hop-

ing to signpost existence. Destination: certainty. In this quest, Muhidin rubbed skin with both man and matter, and, finally, they, not the sea, would rip the fabric of his being.

So many sea years later, a world-bruised Muhidin, buffeted by endless solitude, would again encounter reverberations from that odd day. He was aboard his merchant vessel on a frigid, vile-tempered, night-blackened Atlantic. He had, as usual, assumed duty on the ship's storm watch when, from within seething seas, he glimpsed blue spherical lights gamboling on water. He had blinked as they disintegrated into fractions of the ghost song he had once heard. He had leaned over the railings, baying, "Who are you?" A two-story wave had swamped the ship's deck and drenched him before retreating. Muhidin was at once overcome by a yearning for the island home he had abandoned. Everything he had found so far only hinted at what the ocean's formless song was not. He had no high faith to find shelter in either. This he had earlier offloaded in an Alexandrian souk where an alabaster-skinned vendor of everything, with a sepulchral hawk-nose, had delicately avoided contact with Muhidin's skin.

The souk.

A call to prayer had resounded. The warm-voiced invitation to souls to gather clashed with the chaos of small, bad human habits. Like the word that the trader whose goods Muhidin had spurned had then let slip: Abd. Slave. And inside Muhidin, something had detonated. He had ground his teeth. "Bloodthirsty djinn! Executioner! Gobbler of souls."

The trader's glassy-eyed smile. His stuttered, "Abd . . . my friend . . . You know . . . my friend, brother, it means . . . means . . . submission to the will . . ."

Muhidin had roared: "Stop, thief! Atone! Stink of putrefaction beneath white robes, walking cemetery. *Mtu mwovu*. Imbiber of human blood . . . Atone! Parasite! So you won't touch my hand? Its blackness condemns you? Atone! Thief of land and soul! Atone!"

Fear had distorted the trader's face. Licking his lips, he had whispered to Muhidin, "Look! Look!" He zigzagged backward. He did not close his stall. His arms pointed in all directions. But the others in the market pretended neither to see nor to hear, their faces lowered to avoid Muhidin's incandescent gaze. Muhidin had stomped away, clutching his *balua*. His body's trembling had dislodged the vestiges of faith to which he had clung.

Abd.

Muhidin's uncle had called him Abd for most of his life, until the day of the fishing trip. It was the name he knew from growing up on an island where spoken words could become a covenant and a bond. "*Kuffar*," his uncle had added—"heathen." Using such soft tones while he thrashed Muhidin, and Aunt Zainab just looked at the bleeding boy as she slurped down heavily sugared ginger coffee. This was the face of loneliness, then, the substance of his present disquiet. Images: Uncle Hamid, musical fisherman crouching in white-robed prayer, a *zabiba* on his forehead, hiding the truth of a bloodthirsty will.

Abd.

Muhidin had stridden through that souk, the *halua* perfuming him with sweetness, and a vow on his tongue: *Between religion and my black skin there shall be a sky's distance until the day I hear the Call to Atonement*. Inner weightlessness had followed his vow. Restlessness. He began to pace like the caged black leopard he had seen in a Qatari oilman's vanity zoo, neither happy nor sad. While he was hauling goods or raising chains, he observed himself, as if detached, and wondered why he did what he did. Loading, securing, stowing, unloading, Muhidin clamped down on his thoughts and refused to consider meaning. Unfettered, he soaked his senses in unlimited indulgences: wine, women, words, drugs of assorted flavors, and ceaseless political discourse. He developed an opinion about everything. In this way, Muhidin massaged his unease until the day when, after twenty-eight years, three months, eight days, and seven hours of fealty to the sea, on a simple humid June morning in 1992, his Panama-registered ship reached Zanzibar Harbor.

The morning sun on Unguja Island had been golden and fierce, and its piercing had caused Muhidin to cover his eyes. When he could look, he gaped at Zanzibar Island as if seeing it anew. On the docks below, at least twenty-six emaciated, runny-nosed harbor cats purr-meowed while the flimsy veils between worlds made time brittle. Colonizing crows, wind, warmth, and voices. Muhidin glimpsed a forgotten self amid all the others he had accumulated: fisherman, stevedore, able-bodied seaman, junior engineer, utility man, lover, temporary husband, man with nothing to graft himself on to, salt on his face as the

East African air entered him. Two translucent insects chased light in front of him, and a nameless merchant, into whose body numerous worlds had embedded their stories as deep wrinkles, pointed at him and waved. Tears had dribbled down Muhidin's bearded jowls and fallen into the oil-stained water of the Zanzibar port. Muhidin clutched the guardrails, and a preternatural desolation gnawed him. A second later, a large piece of machinery clanged. His shipmates' voices called him, wrapping his name in fond abuse. The chief officer yelled at him from a height. He turned to grab the nearest out-of-place object, a half-empty water tank, to heft up, carry away, and use to hide his face.

Yet, later, under obsidian darkness, Muhidin slunk away from his life at sea. Muhidin bribed two harbor "rats"—boys of unknown age, who scrounged for anything, and who circled the harbor like djinns bound to one place—to help him haul down five gunnysacks laden with the repositories of his sea exile: books, maps, bottled attars, calligraphy ink and brushes, incense, dried perfumed blood, dried herbs, tree resin including frankincense, two shirts, shorts, a hat, and a large coat. He carried his money in a thick leather pouch strapped to his body. Muhidin and the "rats" had skulked along the shadows and depressions of the new harbor to cross into Stone Town through a hole in the fence. They huddled along coral walls, and re-entered the labyrinths of in-between worldliness to the sound of Algerian *rai*. He remembered the perfumed, wide-eyed women wearing black *bui-buis*. Now they glided past him with the single fluttering gaze and bracelet-tinkling seduction perfected here. Food smells. Muhidin inhaled biryani, pilau, coconut-flavored aromas; chutney, pickles, yogurts, peppers, *mbaazi*, and *mabamri*; custard apple and avocado juice offered by a baby-faced vendor. "*Shikamoo*," a pigtailed girl said in greeting as she curtsied before an older rotund man dressed in a gleaming white *kanzu*; he heard Kiswahili cadences and ubiquitous whispers, reggae by Bob Marley and Peter Tosh; he saw dim doorways that veered off the maze. Muhidin's sudden laugh had been a basset hound's bark. They hurried toward Old Dhow Harbor, and stopped along an ancient stone ledge that skirted the sea unevenly.

Muhidin saw a lantern-lit midsized vessel floating a short distance from the docks—a dismal behemoth bulging out in unusual places. It looked as if it should have been burned as an act of mercy

at least a century ago. It had been hopefully named *Umm Kultbum*. Its *nahodba*—or captain—stood in silhouette as if welded to his vessel. “*Masalkberri*”—Good evening—Muhidin called, his voice a grit-speckled gravel of underuse.

The *nahodba*, a colossus, detached himself from his boat, slipped into water that came up to the top of his thighs; as he waded toward Muhidin, he asked, in singsong mellifluousness, “*Nani mwenzangu?*”—Who is my companion?

“Muhidin Khamis Mlingoti wa Baadawi.”

“*Du!* Such a name! What do you want?”

“To spout poetry to the stars with you. What do you think, man? To go.”

“What’s your problem? Where?”

Pate. A phantom-calling invocation. Memories crawled over Muhidin like arachnids sneaking out of forgotten crypts. “*Pate*.” Muhidin shuddered. Surf breaking, speckled light-in-darkness sea spray filled holes of decrepit silences.

The captain had grumbled, “Only fools and criminals cross the sea in this season.”

“Then I’m a fool,” Muhidin had growled.

The boatman grunted. “True. What’ll you pay?”

“Anything.”

“Passport?”

“You need one?” Muhidin countered.

“No.”

“Neither do I.”

“What’re you carrying?”

“Simple things.”

“Don’t want trouble.”

“None from me.”

“We leave at dawn.” The boatman had turned toward the bobbing *Umm Kultbum*.

Muhidin had called, “Wait for me. I’ll be in the boat.”

“You’re mad, man.”

“Maybe.”

Muhidin and the urchins had hauled his goods into the *dau*. Before dawn, six other travelers and three deckhands had joined them on board. They set off with the morning’s high tide.

. . .

Some of the passengers had disembarked at some of the small half-living ports along the way—Tumbatu, Pemba, Kilifi, and Shimoni—but when together, the men shared the crew's tasks of balancing or patching up the vessel, and bailing out water over the six days and nights required to navigate changing currents and tides, trusting in the goodwill of winds and reaching Northern Kenya waters. At around 2:00 p.m. of the sixth day, the *nabodba* turned the *Umm Kulthum* toward an old sign on a protruding rock that indicated the way to Pate Island. This also marked the waterway that elephants once used to island-hop at low tide. They had turned into the Mkanda Channel, avoiding the riskier deep-sea passage. When they passed the mighty mangrove thicket, Muhidin's heart started to ache. The white tips of sandbars. Faza, reshaped by a fire, Ndau Island, and, before long, the black sand shore of Ras Mtangawanda. Soon Muhidin became one of few arrivals stepping onto Pate Island. *Returning to what?* His knees had weakened as he crisscrossed invisible boundaries that outlined the past, his and the island's. Then easy laughter, the relativity of time. He walked and stared at the frontiers that marked crumbling graves, shrines to scholarship, vestiges of shipbuilding yards, tombs of saints, the syncretic signs of previously confident gods; a sturdy mosque that shared its space with all other worship. The people, his people. An old face crossed his path, and it was familiar. Seconds later, Muhidin's heart had burst; it let out a howl. Children playing close by stopped their game. Three brave boys ran over to see what had caused the sound and discovered a supplicating man on his knees, a man who had just learned that a long, twisted road through vast realms had arched right back home.

That was then.

As for the yellow-brown parchment Muhidin breathed on, today he was certain of only two things: all it offered was that he had it, and, like everything else he touched, it was crumbling before he could decipher it.