An Excerpt From: Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. "Birth of a Dream Weaver."

Images of the numerous atrocities committed by the white settler regime in Kenya compete within me. It is not so much the wanton massacres, the mass incarcerations, and the violent mass relocations; these were too large to take in wholly at the time. It's the singular, the apparently errant, and the bizarre that creep to mind.

It is Molo. A white settler lends his white visitor a horse to ride to the station, seventeen miles away. He orders a worker, probably the one who looks after the stable, to walk with the rider so he can bring the animal back. The iron-hoofed horse trots; the barefoot worker runs to keep pace. On the way back, the tired worker mounts the horse. Whites who see a black body on a horse report the sacrilege.

The settler owner flogs the worker. European neighbors come to watch the sport. As evening descends, the exhausted master ties the worker with a rein and locks him up in a storehouse. After a sumptuous evening meal, the master goes back to the storehouse, finds the worker lying unconscious, the rein loosened a little. The master is concerned less with the unconscious condition than the loose chain. It's a sign of attempted escape. He ties the captive tighter than before, fastens the man's hands to a post, and locks the door. Master sleeps well; the worker sleeps forever. This takes place on June 10, 1923.

When eventually the case reaches the courts held in the Nakuru Railways Institute before Justice Sheridan, the outcome rests on the intention, not of the killer, but of the murdered. Apparently before he passed out, he had been heard to say, "I am dead." The all-white jury reached a unanimous verdict: the torture had nothing to do with his death. He had willed it. Natives did not die under settlers' "hands; they willed their death. The jury finds the settler guilty only of grievous hurt. The East African Standard of August 2–10, 1923, covered the case extensively, and clearly, judging from her archives, Karen Blixen drew from the coverage in her retelling of the story in her memoir, Out of Africa.1 She knew the settler's real name, Jasper Abraham, but interestingly, never mentions it.

Though the way she tells Kitosch's story, the clarity of the details in particular, would suggest that the case disturbed her, Blixen, who writes as Isak Dinesen, ends up not denouncing the travesty of justice but seeing, in the death of the native, "a beauty all its own." In his will to die is embodied the fugitiveness of the wild things who are, in the hour of need, conscious of a refuge somewhere in existence; who go when they like; of whom we can never get hold."2 Death from torture becomes a thing of beauty. It's the way of the wild, a mystery, at which a rational mind can only marvel.

How easily the zoological image flows out of the liberal and conservative pens of white travelers in Africa. In 1909 Theodore Roosevelt in his safari to East Africa was awed by the wild man and wild beast reminiscent of Europe twelve thousand years before. The Dane and the American looked through the same race-tinted glasses. Earlier in the book, she had said that what she learned from the game of the country was useful to her in her dealings with the native people.

Blixen's world straddled Kenya as a British company property and as a Crown Colony, 1920 being the demarcation year. Baroness Blixen left Kenya in 1931 for her Danish homeland. But when in 1952 the "Mau Mau" war for land and freedom broke out and Governor Evelyn

Baring declared a state of emergency, the scene and the wish to die theory reappeared on a larger stage, the whole country. Its reappearance had a history to it."

A year into the war (or the Emergency, as it was called), the government hired Doctor J.C. Carothers, MB, DPM, author of The African Mind and Disease,3 and paid the psychiatrist handsomely to study "Mau Mau." In 1955 this expert on the African mind published the results under the title The Psychology of Mau Mau.4 He diagnosed Mau Mau as mass mania manifesting itself in violence and witchcraft.

He was not original. In 1851, a hundred years before him, Samuel A. Cartwright, another self-avowed expert on the black mind, this time in the USA, had presented a paper, "Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race,"5 to the Louisiana Medical Association, diagnosing the desire to escape slavery as a mental disorder, which he gave the name drapetomania. A severe seizure of the mania resulted in the victim's actually attempting to run away from the slave heaven."

Carothers's medical science and Cartwright's before him tapped into a mix of the mythic and Christian: witches, witchcraft, and devil possession. The settler, like his historical slaver counterpart, saw his system as natural, rational, laudable, God's goodness manifest; its defiance, a deviation and departure from the desirable norm, a devil's manifesto. Now, hired medical science sided with his profitable but warped view of the universe. In Cartwright, the union of psychiatry, psychology, and Christianity found its apotheosis in a slave plantation; in Carothers, in a settler colony. Cartwright's cure, amputation of the toes, making it impossible to get far on foot, is echoed in Carothers's call for amputation of the soul, making it impossible to desire freedom. Both recommended prevention by casting out the devil that made them carry out crazy ideas: in Cartwright's case, by continuous torture to induce permanent submission; in Carothers's, by quarantine of thousands into concentration camps and by forced confession of their sins. But the most highly recommended cure by the two experts was the imperative: make them work. Work cleanses. In Kenya, the recommendations move from the desk of a psychologist to that of Evelyn Baring, former governor of Southern Rhodesia 1942–1944, appointed governor of Kenya in 1952. The doctrine becomes official: "Once a man can be led to the position of having to do some work and so purge himself of the Mau Mau oath he has taken, there is a chance that he will be rehabilitated.

There's a problem. The afflicted don't want to be freed of their affliction. They are political prisoners, not slaves, they say. But to their British captors, captive rhymes with slave and native. Christianity had failed to reform the souls of benighted Kenya natives. Moral surgery by way of the physical was deemed necessary: the philosophy bears the name of John Cowan, then Kenya's senior superintendent of prisons. It was put to the test in the notorious case of Hola.